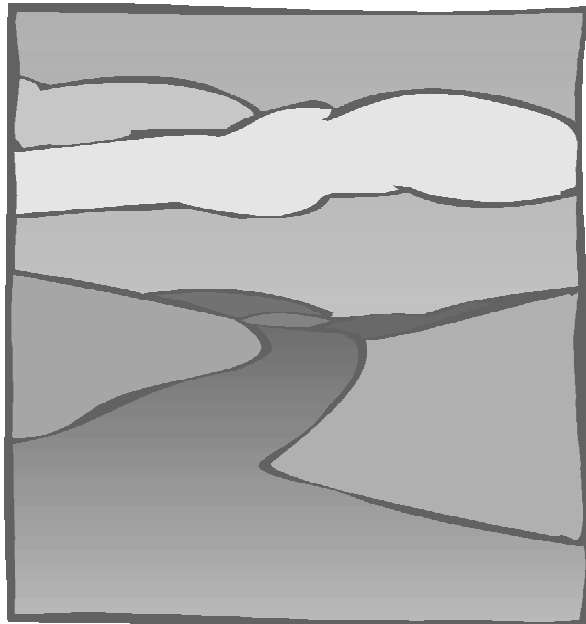


Sabbatical

2009



Final Document

Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

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SABBATICAL BLOG ENTRIES

May 31 – Sabbatical Sendoff Sermon

This is the sermon I preached on Sunday, May 31, my last Sunday before Sabbatical. I can't begin to articulate the emotions I feel as I deliver this sermon. I hope I did justice to the concept of sabbatical and God's work during this time.

SCRIPTURE - Exodus 20:8-11

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Genesis 12:1-9

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

SERMON

Honoring the Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11; Gen. 12:1-9

May 31, 2009

Well, here we are. It's May 31. You know, we've been talking about and planning this sabbatical for so long that I never actually expected it to happen. It's always been something "out there" or "coming up," but today we stand on the cusp of this new chapter in our relationship and in the life of the church.

I've learned through this process that a sabbatical is not a familiar concept to a lot of people. There's something that seems a bit strange about giving someone three months off from work with pay. I don't mind it so much but I could see where, in this workaholic world, it could seem foreign. Believe me, I feel the weight of responsibility and level of trust that such a thing conveys, and I don't have the words to express my gratitude to you. The Sabbatical Planning Team and I have tried to provide some education and context to help the congregation understand exactly what a sabbatical is and how it is to be used.

So what is it? What are these next three months? I've most often heard it called a "vacation," which I admit makes me cringe a bit. Our American understanding of vacation is going someplace warm and sunny, lounging around a pool sipping drinks with little plastic umbrellas. As Michael pointed out in his May newsletter article, vacation comes from the Latin root which means "to be empty, free or at leisure," which means vacations are times to be free from obligations and to be at leisure (as opposed to "be at work").

Based on that definition, I most certainly won't be on vacation. Yes, I will be free from the day-to-day, week-to-week demands of ministry, but I am committed to doing other things like reading, writing and attending conferences, that will keep me connected to my vocation and God's calling. In some sense I will still be working on my sabbatical, including as Michael said, "doing the work of resting," but I will be working with a different focus and at a different pace than when I am in the office. My promise to you and to God is that I am committed to being a better minister when I come back.

Another way to speak of time away is what our friends in England call a "holiday." To go on holiday is to take a break, to get away from the daily routines of life. I like this term because it derives from the two words "holy day." Something that's holy is something sacred, something set apart by God. I certainly hope my sabbatical time is filled with holiness, a time set apart by God. But I don't do a good British accent so I can't go around all summer saying "I'm on holiday." That just won't work and could get me arrested.

The term that best describes what's happening this summer is a "sabbatical," and it fits so well because of its biblical origin. The word obviously comes from the word "Sabbath," which is what was addressed in our first reading today. One of the 10 Commandments God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai was to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Just as God did the work of rest on the seventh day of creation, so the Israelites and all of their workers were to do the work of rest every seven days. The purpose of the Sabbath was to honor God's creation, to rest up from the week before, and to rejuvenate for the week ahead. Similarly, I am plan on honoring God, resting up from the eight years that have come before, and rejuvenate for whatever lies ahead. I continue to be blessed by working with this congregation, but I am also ready, albeit it three years late, to step away and allow my spirit to refill for continuing to do God's work. I am looking forward to doing the work of resting.

But Sabbath is about more than just rest. It's also about worship. The idea behind the Sabbath was to take time you would normally commit to work and instead commit it to God. On my sabbatical one of the things I'm most looking forward to doing is worshipping God, unencumbered by the responsibilities of my work. I can't wait to remember what it feels like to sit in a pew for an entire service. I plan on visiting a number of other churches and doing some in-depth Bible reading as ways of worshipping God, neither of which I get to do very often while I'm working.

I've put a number of other activities and events into my sabbatical plan. I did that for a couple of reasons. First, I want the congregation to benefit from my sabbatical, and I don't mean not having to listen to me preach for three months, although there may be some benefits there, as well. The work that I will be doing on sabbatical is not just the work of rest, but the work of renewal. That includes stepping back from the daily obligations to look at the bigger picture of who we are as a church by focusing more closely on our mission statement. The conferences I'll be attending, the books I'll be reading and the things I'll be writing will hopefully have a direct impact on this church as we continue to explore who God has called us to be. I want my sabbatical to be purposeful rest that benefits you as well as me.

Another reason I put together a detailed sabbatical plan is because I like to know what's coming. If this is more than a vacation or a holiday, then I need to prove it, I need to justify – most importantly to myself – why I'm taking a sabbatical. I've always agreed with Jean-Paul Sartre, who gave us the action-oriented “To do is to be.” But others side with the more laid-back Socrates, who said “To be is to do.” And the smartest people side with Frank Sinatra, who said “Do be do be do.” We spent all our lives doing and not nearly enough time just being. Sabbath is a time to just be in God's presence, to be still and know that God is God, and we are not.

The reading from Genesis today is an important reminder to me and to all of us that while we may think we know where the road ahead leads us, in reality we are not in control of the future. I like to think I know what's best, that I know exactly what's going to happen, but I think that just makes God laugh when I say that. So while I'm tempted to point to my sabbatical plan and tell you I've dotted all the I's and crossed all the T's for my sabbatical, there's another part of me that's excited – and more than a little anxious – about what God has planned.

That's why the Abram story is such a wonderful commentary on my sabbatical. God comes to Abram and tells him to drop what he's doing. “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.” In other words, Abram is taking a sabbatical, whether he wants to or not! And all he knows about this upcoming time is what God has promised him: God will lead the way and God will bless Abram along the journey.

Externally, I know where I'll be going and what I'll be doing on my sabbatical. But internally, I have no idea what's going to happen. I've never done this before. I've always been driven by my work, and now I'm stepping back to let God do the driving. I don't like being in the passenger seat, especially when it's my life we're talking about, but I believe that's one of the many lessons God has in store for me. So I am preparing for my journey. Is it scary? Yeah, a bit. But it's also incredibly thrilling.

I'm not the only one that God is calling on a journey. This congregation is also being called to follow God this summer to some unknown destination. Michael and the Sabbatical Planning Team have put together a wonderful plan that will allow the congregation to explore along more deeply along with me the mission statement of the church. As you ponder together what it means to welcome, to equip and to share, I believe that God will be leading you into new territories, opening up new vistas, putting before you new understandings of what it means to be a community, to be Christians, to be a church. I know it's summer, I know life is busy, but don't miss out on what God has planned for you.

And there's one promise we all can claim as we move into sabbatical time: We will be blessed by God. God tells Abram, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you.” Whatever God has in store for us this summer, we can believe that God will be walking with us and that we will be blessed through it. When we come back together in September we won't be the same. I will be a different person, changed by my time away, and I trust you will be different as well, if you are willing to participate in this sabbatical time of rest and renewal.

While I'm gone, I also trust that you are in good hands. You are in Michael's hands. Michael is an incredibly competent, compassionate young man with wisdom beyond his years. He will be an excellent leader for you this summer. You are in Nelson's hands, hands that have touched the heart of this congregation so lovingly for many, many years. And you are in God's hands. That is the safest place to be.

This morning, as I prepare to take my leave and follow God's call, I hope you know you will continue to be in my thoughts and in my prayers this summer, and I hope I am in yours, as well. While you will be out of sight and out of contact, you will not be out of my mind or my

heart. The promise that we have been given through Jesus Christ is that we are all connected together as believers, regardless of where we are. When I worship these next three months, although it may be in a different building or in a different town, we will still be praying and singing to the same God, one body united together through Jesus Christ. So I want to give you something to help you remember that. (At this point in the sermon, small wooden crosses were handed out to each person). Please keep these crosses close to you this summer. Each time you see it or touch it, say a prayer for me on my sabbatical. Say a prayer for this congregation and for its leaders. And say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for giving us this time. Each time I see this cross, I will remember the holiness of my time away and it doing so I pray I will honor you and honor God.

May 31 – Day 1

Well, my sabbatical officially started today around 1 p.m. (that's when I left church). We had a wonderful celebration with lots of good food and many, many well-wishes. I also received a generous gift from several members of the congregation which I think I'm going to use to upgrade my 15-year-old golf clubs. What, they don't make them out of actual wood anymore?

Today was truly bittersweet for me. I'm overflowing with joy and excitement about my sabbatical, but it's hard to fathom that I won't see these wonderful people for three months. The congregation is such an important part of my life; I will miss them in ways I probably can't even describe. I gave everyone present today a small wooden cross and I have kept one for myself. The crosses are reminders to all of us to pray for each other and to thank God for our blessings.

No big plans for the coming week other than start working on the Honey-Do list and reading some books. Right now, the easiest way to describe how I feel is T-I-R-E-D. I don't think I realized how tired I was until I got home from church today. It's going to take a week or two for me to decompress, I'm sure.

June 1 – Letting Go

Well, I have to admit that I emailed church a few times today. I had just a few things I needed to tie up or else they would have bugged me for the next three months. I figured I wouldn't be able to go cold turkey in my communication with the church, but what surprised me today was how much I found myself wanting to be in contact with the church. I was driving down in that area today and had to fight a strong urge to just drop in and say "Hi." If I'm missing that place this much on the first day, what will it be like in a month?

I've had several pastors tell me that when they went on sabbatical, it took them a week or two to decompress and clear their system of church life. I thought that sounded a bit silly at the time, but now I believe it. I really need to fully disconnect from my job, but the church has become so ingrained in my life that it's going to be difficult to do. So much of who I am is intertwined with the congregation I serve. So much of my own emotions are connected to the lives of the congregation members. I miss them already.

I did something today I've wanted to do for a long time: I ordered a new set of golf clubs. I've had my current set for 15 years. When I told the salesman this, he laughed and said, "The technology has changed a bit since the last time you bought clubs." Yeah, thanks Jack Nicklaus, I figured that. My clubs are so old I think they were carved from a tree. With the salesman's expert help, he fitted me for a new set of Lynx irons which are not only nifty, but also were inexpensive to begin with and then were also on sale. That's what I call shooting under par at the golf store. I

also got a new 3-wood (it's really colorful!) and a new golf bag that has more pockets than a kangaroo farm.

Tomorrow I'm going to prepare to retackle our bedroom floor. I installed laminated flooring in there a few years ago but didn't really have any idea what I was doing, and it shows. Unfortunately, the bad spots can't be covered up with a well-placed rug because they are right in the walkway. So tomorrow I'm going to start pulling up the floor and on Wednesday my buddy Tim is coming over to help me reinstall it. I'm not sure I have any better idea what I'm doing, but at least this time I'll have someone to blame if it doesn't work well.

June 2 – To Answer or Not to Answer

As if God read my previous post, I had my first test today. Late this afternoon, my cell phone started ringing. It was a call from a person in our congregation who may not have been aware of my sabbatical or the "rules" that govern it. I looked at my wife. She said, "Don't answer." I didn't.

Thirty seconds later, the home phone rings. Same person. "Don't answer." I didn't.

Thirty seconds later, my cell phone rings again. Yep, same person. "You can't answer it, Kory." I didn't.

It was so hard not to pick up the phone. The reaction was almost involuntary. The phone rings, I see it's a congregation member, I answer. Part of that is the seriousness with which I take the responsibility of my vocation, part of it is probably the need to be needed. My ego is healthy enough that I like being needed. Can I go for three months without answering that call? Hopefully I won't have too many more tests.

Finally saw "Wolverine" today. It was OK, but I expected more. I also fixed two broken boards in our fence and got the bedroom floor ready to start working tomorrow. And I reintroduced myself to our treadmill. It had been some time since I'd used it. My goals for the sabbatical are to better myself spiritually, physically, and vocationally.

And to not answer the phone.

June 3 – Floored

Well, I'm glad to report the phone call I didn't answer yesterday turned out OK, thanks to our crack Minister Team. Way to go, guys...Flat-TireGate '09 has been avoided!

I'm really excited my new book (see the title at the right). I'm really intrigued by how churches can make use of current and developing technology to connect with their congregation and prospective visitors (for example, I'm thinking about starting a blog..heh heh). The church has been so far behind the curve in a lot of ways in the last few decades (Guitars? In church?? No siree, not us, pipe organ all the way...wait, a guitar might not be so bad). If the church can take advantage of the emerging communication tools, we may actually stay less than 10 years behind the culture curve.

I think this book will be very helpful for my congregation and I look forward to reading it. One issue that's tangentially related to the topic is how you stay connected to those who aren't technologically savvy while investing in new communication tools. We have about six or so people who don't use email, and probably several more who don't surf the Web. What I don't want to do is prioritize our online communications and leave behind those people in the congregation who won't make use of it. I think I tend to assume that everyone checks their email 16 times a day and has the church website as their homepage. Such an assumption is dangerous because for those who don't make use of technology, they may not get important news and

updates (for example, we have a call list of people without email so that when we send out a Community Care Bulletin email, those folks are still in the know). I'll be interested to see if Baab addresses this in the book.

Tim and I tackled the bedroom floor today. We didn't make as much progress as I had hoped. I ran into the same frustrations as when I laid the floor the first time. I won't bore you with details, but the boards don't lock together easily or stay locked after they are in place. It seems like if you sneeze they come apart. So after a frustrating morning, Tim and I walked to Jack's Chicago Style Red Hots and after a couple of hot dogs we had a plan. We were humming right along when we realized we didn't have the right kind of saw, so we had to put things on hold until next week when Tim is available again. I am committed to finishing the floor before September!

June 5 – Staying Connected

One of my goals for my sabbatical is to use my time to help my congregation explore more deeply what it means to welcome, to equip and to share (the three focal points of our mission statement). In June I'm reading a few books and attending a conference that addresses how a church can be more welcoming.

I've just finished the first book, written by Lynne Baab ("Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul"). It was very well-written and an incredibly helpful resource for exploring how a congregation can use new technology to stay connected. But more than just a how-to book, "Reaching Out" also helps you think about the "why" behind different forms of communications and keys the reader into the bigger picture of how church identity and values are formed and reinforced through the communication choices made. Baab is a pastor and has a Ph.D. in Communication (her dissertation was on congregational websites), so she's a perfect person to write about this topic. Another fantastic book from the Alban Institute.

"Reaching Out" had so many good things to say that I won't try to encapsulate them all in one post. So here are a few nuggets to share from the first couple of chapters...

-- "The central point of this book is that the way congregations communicate their values and identity has become a vitally important concern for our time" (p. 2).

This statement assumes, of course, that a church has a clear sense of its values (what it considers to be important) and identity (defining aspects of its character).

-- Each communication piece should be evaluated to see if congregational priorities are being accurately and authentically communicated to visitors.

-- If we asked 10 people at CCC to make a list of five to ten values that are most significant to our congregation, what would they say? My list would include: prayer, fellowship, caring for one another, sense of community, children. Do we do a good job of communicating these values, not only to visitors and newcomers but to our current congregation?

-- Three characteristics of healthy congregations (from Diana Butler Bass): intentionality, practice and vitality. I would say CCC does well with intentionality but doesn't do enough to encourage the practice, which hurts the vitality.

-- Our communication tools not only reflect identity, they help shape it. Therefore, "part of our task as leaders is to be careful about all the ways the identity of the

congregation gets constructed through the congregation's communication and actions, and the symbols it uses" (p. 19).

-- In her extensive study of church websites, what does Baab remember most? "I remember visual images and stories most of all. List of principles... don't stick in my mind as profoundly" (p. 21).

-- Postmodern churchgoers are looking for authenticity. What conveys that? "Personal stories play a significant role, along with the affirmation that questions are welcome, that doubt can be a teacher in the life of faith, and that mistakes help people grow" (p. 24). I've preached on doubt many times, so I hope that message has been conveyed. We welcome questions at CCC; do we do a good enough job communicating that? And do we give people tools to search for the answers?

-- Baab makes the point that we are now living in the middle of an image-based culture and that has serious implications for the church. "With the move away from a word-based to an image-based culture, leaders of congregations need to do some careful thinking about the role of visual communication in our time" (p. 35). This becomes more difficult when serving a church without visual communication tools in the worship space.

-- Baab is not apologetic about using the word "marketing" when talking about how a church represents itself to the larger community. Good for her! This is an example of a business term that fits well in the church (unlike other terms such as "committee").

-- The ways in which we craft our personal identities are drastically changing. Think about how much we can learn about someone by looking at their Facebook or Myspace profile. Their identity is constructed there. How can we construct a church identity for the online community? What do we want that identity to be? Is it congruous with what visitors will experience when they come to CCC?

OK, that's just the introduction and the first two chapters. More tomorrow!

June 6 – Sunday Dilemma

Well, part of my sabbatical plan for June is to worship at a couple of different churches to see how they do "welcoming." I'm looking forward to visiting other congregations and singing different songs, hearing different sermons and experiencing different styles of worship.

But not tomorrow. I've been wrestling with whether or not to go to church this weekend. A part of me wants to jump right in and visit other churches, but I have to admit the idea of sleeping in one Sunday is awfully tempting. Maybe now I know how my congregation feels each Sunday! I toyed with the idea of going to a Saturday evening service, but the day got away from me before I made a decision. So I think my family has convinced me to take the weekend off. I've earned it, right? We'll sleep in tomorrow and plan to worship next weekend at a local church. There are plenty to choose from.

June 7 – More from “Reaching Out in a Networked World”...

Baab draws on Leonard Sweet's book "Postmodern Pilgrims" to establish four characteristics needed to reach people in our Postmodern age. According to Sweet, worship and ministry must be EPIC: experiential, participatory, image-driven and connected. She then evaluates the different forms of modern connectivity in light of these four characteristics (e.g., websites are participatory and image-driven). Sweet's book is very good and helps us understand how to reach out to people in our postmodern culture. Baab makes excellent use of Sweet's categories.

Baab also brings up an interesting point about the role of the word vs. the image in our current churches. For centuries, the central focus on worship was the word. After all, Jesus is the "Word made flesh." In fact, images were often equated with idols and banned from places of worship. But in our image-driven culture, people have been conditioned to respond more to images than words. Churches are now starting to welcome images back into their worship space. But, as Baab points out, "theological reflection on visual communication as it is used today is in its infancy" (p. 61). So how does that translate to the church? Is Jesus now the "Image made flesh"? How can we incorporate aspects of our image-driven culture without losing the centrality and importance of the word (and the Word)? And how can we encourage our congregations to think theologically about how and why we use images instead of become liturgical lemmings and blindly following the latest trends?

Baab says we also have to be careful with images because they are polyvalent (capable of conveying multiple meanings). A picture of a man conversing with a small child can convey one thing to a family looking for a kid-friendly church and quite another thing to a young person who was abused as a child by a male. In addition, the images we choose send a message about our identity and values. If most of the images on our website are of older people, what message does that send to a young family with children looking for a church? In other words, as Baab asks, what stories do our images tell?

To Baab's point, here are four different representations of our denominational symbol, the chalice. What story does each one tell? What conclusions would you draw about the congregations that use each of these symbols? Respond in the Comments and let me know what you think:



Baab goes on in Ch. 4 to talk about websites, what she calls the new "front page" for congregations. Here are a few quick hits from this chapter:

-- Every church website should have a "Visitor's Center" with information like a basic description of the worship service(s), what to wear, what children and youth can expect, how to get there, and where to park.

-- Links to information about outreach activities and local non-profit/service organizations sends a message about how the congregation values such ministries.

-- Long statements of faith convey that congregations place a high value on doctrine.

-- A picture of the church building (especially on the homepage) sends the message that the church's values are connected to the building, not the people.

-- Characteristics of good website photos: Pictures of people, head or upper body only, looking directly at the viewer. This conveys both intimacy and a direct invitation.

-- Each congregation needs at least one "critical friend" who look at the website to see if it accurately conveys the congregation's values and priorities.

In the next post I'll address blogs, email, online communities and desktop publishing. This information from Baab is invaluable for churches in our current culture.

June 14 – Church Visit – The Chapel

I made my first church visit while on sabbatical today. I took last weekend off (hey, I figured I had earned it!). Today I worshipped at The Chapel, a non-denominational multi-site church whose main campus is in Grayslake, not far from my house. It's also where I play basketball on Fridays, so I already knew a few of the pastors.

I have to admit I was nervous going to church as a worshipper. For the first time in a long time, I had no duties or responsibilities. I was simply there to observe and worship, to see what I could learn from this church about how my congregation could be more welcoming

The Grayslake campus of The Chapel looks like a giant office building. The entryway is huge and roomy and leads directly back to their auditorium-style sanctuary which I would guess seats 1500 or so. It was about three-quarters full at the 11 a.m. service that I attended.

The Chapel has a gauntlet of greeters for visitors. There's the folks who open the door for you, the folks who greet you as soon as you walk in that door, and Brent Davis, the campus pastor, who stands in the main entryway to the sanctuary. Brent is a basketball buddy, so we chatted for a few minutes before I took a seat in the back of the sanctuary.

Before I entered the worship space I spent some time mulling around the gathering area. There was a small bookstore, a centralized information center and several information tables promoting various ministries. Everything was clearly labeled with signs and there was an informal, comfortable atmosphere. But other than the greeters, no one spoke to me.

It feels weird calling the Chapel's worship space a "sanctuary," because there was nothing in it to signify that it was a Christian space. Even the ubiquitous Chapel logo is vague. The picture of a tree standing beside a flowing stream could easily represent a landscaping company or a agrarian retirement village.

As I entered the sanctuary, I was handed some material by an usher that included information about ongoing ministries and the current message series. No bulletin was included, but as I would soon find out, wouldn't be needed. The service is simple and no itinerary is needed to follow along. What little instructions there were came from the worship leaders.

I took my seat about five minutes early and enjoyed the Newsboys worship music that played on the stereo system (I could sing “He Reigns” 1000 times a day). The room was dominated by the large stage and two gigantic video screens on either side of it. The stage was minimally decorated and had musical equipment for the worship band. The screens ran a variety of announcements and message (“Please silence your cell phones”).

When worship started, the band took their place and the female worship/song leader gave us an enthusiastic greeting and launched into the first of three songs. While we were encouraged to stand and sing, the songs were much easier to listen to than to sing along with. I couldn’t judge whether those around me were belting it out or not, but the congregational singing sounded pretty subdued compared to the singer on stage. After each song, the crowd applauded.

After the third song, Brent took the stage and offered words of welcome and a few announcements. Brent was energetic and engaging. The humor was a bit trite but Brent has such an affable personality that it didn’t really matter. Brent invited us to say a greeting to those around us (no one talked to me but one guy did wave), and Brent also encouraged us to fill out the “Family Time Card” in the information we were given by the usher. I couldn’t find a pen. Turns out they were in a basket right inside the sanctuary doors. Missed that one.

Brent ended his time on stage by introducing the morning’s message, which was a bit different than what usually happens at the Chapel. One of the senior pastors, Jeff Griffin, was going to interview Catherine Rohr, who founded Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP), a prison ministry in Texas. This would take the place of the usual sermon. Brent then walked off stage and we watched a short news clip about PEP (you can find more information at www.pep.org).

Then the coolest thing happened. The interview started, but it took me a few minutes to realize that Griffin and Rohr weren’t actually on stage. They were being simulcast from another Chapel location in Vernon Hills, but the screen on-stage was so clear and the images so life-like that you could easily be fooled into thinking you were watching real people. It was both amazing (from a techno-geek standpoint) and a bit disconcerting (because it gave the illusion of a real person speaking to you, inviting you to connect with that person – or at least that person’s electronic image).

The interview was interesting but a bit long. Griffin was jocular and quick with a joke, yet deftly Christianized Rohr’s comments and applied them to each of our faith journeys. The interview was followed by a gospel rap song from one of PEP’s success stories. Brent then came back on stage, closed us in prayer, and we left. As I exited the sanctuary, I ran into another basketball buddy, Dave, who’s on staff at The Chapel. We chatted for a minute, I wandered around the narthex a bit more, and then headed to my car. I realized as I started the engine that I had only had two substantive conversations, and they were both with people I already knew. Otherwise, no connection was made.

But I would imagine at a place the size of The Chapel, such one-to-one connections are hard to make. When you have 100 in worship, visitors stand out. When you have 800 in worship, you can easily be anonymous (or be treated as anonymous). They make connections through the personalities of the pastors and worship leaders on stage and through their outstanding communications, from the video screens to the in-house magazine as was given as I exited. Much of the written material was designed to speak directly to me, ostensibly to replace the fact that no one actually spoke directly to me (other than my previous acquaintances).

Two final observations to make. First, no scripture was read during the service (although Griffin did connect PEP’s ministry to prisoners with the story of Zaccheus). I assume this would

be different if there was an actual sermon. I plan on attending again to see. Second, as you walk in the sanctuary, there's a little slit in the wall with a sign above it that says "Tithes and Contributions" or something like that. There's also a small station in the gathering space with pledge cards, set up much like a station in the bank where you would fill out your checking deposit slip. Other than that, no mention was ever made of given and certainly no offering was taken.

What can I take away from this visit that could be used at my church? Not much, but that's not a negative comment on The Chapel. They are so much bigger than CCC that it really is like comparing apples and oranges. Even still, there are a few important things to note:

- Nothing replaces the personal greeting and contact, and nothing makes you feel as awkward when it doesn't happen.
- You can never have too many people responsible for greeting visitors.
- Signage is so important to a first-time visitor. It should be clear, easily read, and everywhere.
- All communications must be done with excellence and carry the message that, "Hey, we know what we're doing and you are important enough to us to get this right."

I look forward to going back to the Chapel. I'll probably check out another satellite campus which I know is smaller than the one in Grayslake. But I also know a few more of my basketball buddies work there. Wonder if anyone else will talk to me?

June 19 - Simply Strategic Sabbatical Reading

In preparation for my conference at Granger Community Church next week, I'm reading two books by two members of its ministerial team. Tim Stevens (Executive Pastor) and Tony Morgan (Pastor of Administration Services) have written a series of books with "Simply Strategic" titles. The two I'm reading are "Simply Strategic Stuff" and "Simply Strategic Growth."

The subtitle for "Simply Strategic Stuff" is "Help for leaders drowning in the details of running the church." The book has 99 suggestions to help pastors better perform their ministerial and administrative duties. While not all 99 are applicable to every church, there are a lot of good suggestions in the book. I'll hit a few of the highlights.

In the Introduction, the authors make a point that is a fundamental truth and challenge to effective ministry. "Ask any pastor who went to seminary how many classes on church administration were required or even offered. The typical response is laughter. Yet pastors are required to hire, fire, manage and supervise, oversee large budgets and the construction of buildings and parking lots - all with little or no training and few resources specific to ministry" (p. 14). I have found that most of my learning in these administrative areas have been through on-the-job training and trial and error (usually taking several trials and many errors to get it right).

Every six months, a pastor should plan a "big event" - a churchwide program, campaign or project (p. 19). There should always be something for the church to look forward to and get excited about. The authors call these "momentum builders." I like this idea a lot. It also requires a church to be continually forward-thinking. Not easy for a church to do, but worth it if a pastor can help make it happen.

Tip #3 is "Count the Cost Before Hiring a Family Member" (p. 23). Guess I should take Sydney and Molly off the payroll as "Ministers of Dessert Testing."

Tip #5 - "If It Feels Good, Check the Data" (p. 26) - Decision-making should be balanced between an accurate measurement (the "data") and listening to the Spirit. Erring too far to one side or another can distort the decision-making process. My experience has been that pastors lean too much toward the Spirit and ignore the facts and congregation members (especially those who make their living in corporate America) rely too much on the data and don't allow enough room for the Spirit's promptings.

Tip #6 - "Don't Spend Your Life with Your Critics" (p. 28) - Wow, this one is tough. I just had a conversation about how to deal with "squeaky wheels" in ministry. It's even harder when the squeaks are aimed in your direction. The authors say "It's OK to listen to criticism as long as you choose the right critics." But I don't choose my critics, and if I ignore those other voices, they'll find someone else in the congregation who will listen. There has to be a healthy balance between giving critics a chance to be heard but not being held hostage by them. I think a pastor need to surround himself or herself with "truth tellers" (preferably a Pastoral Relations Committee) so that the pastor can check out these criticisms with trusted, loving, straightforward congregation members. The importance of this group cannot be understated and I'm not sure how I've made it this far without one.

Tip #7 is called "Get Geeked about Gadgets" (p. 30) and is all about why you should embrace technology as a communication medium among the staff. I love these guys!

Tip #8 - "If Someone Hasn't Left Your Church Recently, Your Vision Is Probably Too Broad" (p. 32) - Excellent point! Churches try too hard to be all things to all people and end up not being much to anyone. The authors say a church should start very focus, do a few things well and then add slowly. That's great for a church just getting launched, but for a church that's been around 40 or 50 years, it's hard to scrap the blueprints and start over, especially in a church with a wide range of ages. Who's going to look the 83-year-old church matriarch in the eye and say, "Sorry, Mabel, but we've decided to focus on young families with children. Good luck!" The focus the authors encourage has to be tempered in an older church with a commitment to serving the entire constituency within the congregation (or encouraging them to serve each other).

Tip #10 - "Visit Other Churches and Steal Their Stuff" (p. 37) - Yes! I call it "sharing the gospel." No need to reinvent the wheel when so many churches are already doing great things. Kudos to Granger for opening up their doors to other pastors via conferences and workshops. We're not in competition; we all play for the same Coach.

Several of the authors' tips revolve around giving decision-making power to the people on the front lines. Tip #9 is called "Work Yourself Out of a Job" (p. 34) and tip #17 is called "Without Systems, All Decisions Rise to the Top" (p. 49). This is the idea of the priesthood of all believers. My job as a pastor is not to do everything, but encourage and empower others to do it. They are just as gifted as me, and in many cases much more gifted. I follow the example of Jesus who, when his disciples fretted about feeding such a large crowd with only a few loaves of bread and some fish, said, "You feed them." My job as pastor is to help people discover their gifts, equip them with the knowledge and spiritual motivation, and then say, "You feed them," and then cheer them on as they do it.

Tip #19 - "Staff Ahead for Growth" - A thousand times "yes!" If a church wants to stay right where it is size-wise, there's no need to add staff. If a church is waiting until the budget or attendance numbers supports hiring a new staff member, it will never happen. If one of your goals is to grow, you have to thinking bigger than you are and live into it. The church should always be thinking bigger than it currently is.

In Tip #22, the authors encourage anointing someone as the "database czar" (p. 58), the person who's responsibility it is to keep all the membership records up to date. Judy does a tremendous job of this at CCC. A good user-friendly membership software is absolutely essential for a church.

Tip #26 - "Perception Matters" (p. 66) - Although the authors use this phrase in conjunction with ministers' conduct, it is a mantra for almost every aspect of ministry. Perception will almost always trump reality when it comes to ministers because so few people actually see the totality of what a minister does. Someone could complain, "Well, I was in the hospital for three days and Kory didn't come to see me." If that perception of me begins to circulate through the church rumor mill, it becomes reality, even if the real reality is different. Ministers have to be skilled at managing (as best we can) perception versus reality and to have a few cheerleaders in the church who aren't afraid to correct misguided or inaccurate perceptions. But in the end, we have to be OK with ourselves and with God. Only we know if we've done what we've been called to do. If the reality is that we have to the best of our ability, that's all we can do. We can't control other people's perceptions.

In Tip #29 "Disgruntled Secretaries Drain Dynamic Leaders" (p. 71), the authors say, "You should never pay for someone to be negative, disgruntled, or difficult to be with. People can do that in your life for free." This gives me another chance to say how blessed I've been to work with some fantastic secretaries at CCC. Denise, Sue, Jeanne (whom I miss terribly since she passed away) and Judy have been an incredible blessing to my ministry. I've seen the anguish an unhappy church secretary can cause. You ladies were and are the best!

That's enough for tonight. More tomorrow from this great book!

June 20 - A Strategic Blog Post

Continuing my reflections from "Simply Strategic Stuff: Help for Leaders Drowning in the Details of Running a Church" by Tim Stevens and Tony Morgan of Granger Community Church.

Tip #35 - "Your Website Today Shouldn't Be Seen Tomorrow" (p. 83) makes the point that website content should constantly be changing so that each visit provides something new for the visitor. That takes dedication and commitment from church leadership to the website, but I believe it's an incredibly important investment on the church's part.

The authors emphasize the importance of ministers knowing the giving of the congregation for the purpose of being able to lead them effectively (Tip #36 - "Giving Is Personal - Not Private" [p. 85]). I used to be dead-set against this, but I'm hearing this argument more and more, and it makes sense. The counter-argument is that big givers would be treated differently, but I find that hard to imagine, at least from a pastoral perspective. Big givers won't get more hospital visits or more eloquent funeral sermons. But they will get handwritten thank you notes and more challenges to give even more. This is an intriguing perspective that I need to mull over some more.

Tip #41 - "Keep Budgeting Simple" (p. 43) - Now here's a hard sell, especially in churches full of business folks. Rather than paying attention to numbers, the authors encourage paying attention to ministries and action plans. As they say, "Remember, the budget is only a plan. It does not define reality." But my experience has been that the budget, even more so than the programs and ministries, defines reality. That's a hard rut to get out of in the church.

Tip #48 - "Don't Vote on the Carpet Color" (p. 106) - I think sometimes we church leaders think our congregation cares more about non-essentials than they really do, and

consequently we ask for their participation in decisions that they aren't really invested in (choosing the color of the carpet in the sanctuary is a great example). My experience has been that, for the most part, the congregation trusts the church leadership to make such decisions. They don't want to have a voice in the process. The leaders were made leaders for a reason. I think some of the reasons we drag out the decision-making process is that we're afraid of backlash or criticism from those who disagree with the decision. Tough turkey. That's why we're leaders and part of leadership is knowing when to stop the buck. If you've paid your relational rent and earned the congregation's trust, a bad decision can be less damaging than a non-decision.

Tip #53 - "People Give to Changed Lives" (p. 115) - Amen! The authors say, "People don't give to budgets. They don't give to buildings, either. People give to changed lives." People don't give to need; they give to vision. They give to make a difference. If we only tell them what the church needs and don't communicate the power behind their giving, we're selling short God's kingdom. We need to tell the story of changed lives, and not just at Stewardship time. Giving your testimony (or for the less evangelical and charismatic, "telling your story") should be a regular part of worship.

Tip #57 - "Bake Sales Don't Pay the Water Bill" (p. 122) - At Granger, they've done away with fundraisers. All of them. No bake sales, no cookbooks, no car washes to support this year's mission trip. They simply ask people to give their tithe or offering to the church, and then the churches use that money to support the ministries of the church. It's so simple, isn't it? At my church we have two fundraisers every year that support our general operating budget, and they have created enough cumulative angst that we might want to rethink why we do them. This tip is a great way to approach it.

Great suggestions in Tip #62 (p. 132) about communication blunders that churches often make. I think a lot of churches shoot themselves in the foot by drowning out the Gospel message with too much superfluous communication. A church's communication plan should be well thought-out and expertly executed. Everything should be done for a reason, and that reason is the vision of the church.

I'll finish up with this book tomorrow and also share my reflections from my Sunday morning worship experience. Blessings to you all!

June 21 – Worshipping Incognito

This Sunday I chose to worship at a smaller Lutheran church to provide a contrasting experience from my visit to last week's mini-mega-church. I was hoping for a more intimate, familial worship experience. This church has three services: a Saturday evening contemporary service, an early Sunday traditional service, and an 11 a.m. Sunday contemporary service. I attended the later Sunday service.

This is the church where I go to participate in the democratic process and cast my vote, so I thought I knew where to enter the building. But when I parked, I noticed most people were going in a different entrance hidden in the back of the church. No signs pointed me toward which entrance to use, so I followed the crowd through the back door.

I was greeted by...well, actually I wasn't greeted at all. I passed by several clusters of people who paid me no mind as I made my way to the sanctuary. There were a lot of lively conversations going on, which gave the impression of a vibrant church. I lingered a few moments then entered the sanctuary, getting my copy of the bulletin and finding a seat in the back right of the worship space about five minutes before the start time. The worship band was

playing what I thought was prelude music, but what turned out to be a last-minute rehearsal. After they finished, the band joined together for a prayer, which made me feel a bit like a voyeur, as this was all happening in front of me.

The sanctuary (or as they call it, the “worship center”) is a beautiful space. There are no pews; all of the chairs are moveable. The front is dominated by a stone wall with a cross and a large projection screen. There is a pulpit and a communion table, as well. The space is open, airy, and well-lit. It felt very comfortable to me.

I used the time before the service to read through the bulletin, which actually wasn’t a bulletin but a list of announcements. I learned that the church is currently without a senior pastor (they do have an interim) and, in a most unfortunate typo, the bulletin informed me they have called a search committee to serve “in this important step in our process to fine a new pastor” (hope the new person has deep pockets). The bulletin also contained a welcome, a calendar of upcoming events, and a financial statement that had two big Xs through it with the note, “Budget numbers are from April – we will get them corrected in the near future – still learning!”

A few minutes later, a man came around with an additional handout which was the actual order of service, including song lyrics. I found this a bit odd since they had a projection screen up front. At about 10:20 the interim pastor stood up and offered words of welcome, which led us into the singing of three songs. All three were well-done by the worship band but not necessarily conducive to congregational singing. The one I knew best, “Voice of Truth” by MercyMe, is a great song, but the verses are not easy to sing if you don’t know them. More sing-able songs would have helped me better prepare my heart for worship. The three songs were fairly long (at least by worship standards) and were followed by a responsive reading, which means we were on our feet for what felt like a long time.

The worship center was probably about a third full, which means there were around 100 people, including a lot of young kids. I sympathized with parents who were trying to participate in worship and keep an eye on the younguns. The interim pastor called the kids down front for the Children’s Message, after which the kids all returned to their seats. This surprised me because the bulletin said there was “Sunday’s Cool” for kids during the 10:15 a.m. worship. As it turned out, the kids stayed in the worship for the entire time.

During the “Passing of the Peace,” I was greeted by about 10 people around me with “Peace be with you” or, if I said that first, “and also with you.” Only one person actually said anything more than those words (she said, “Welcome”). While the spirit of greeting was there, I felt as if people were simply going through the motions. I noticed several people having conversations with others they knew while I stood by myself.

After the greeting a layperson read the scripture for the day, which was Romans 14. All of Romans 14. Again I found this interesting because that’s a long time to ask people to pay attention to a reading (even though thankfully the reading was also printed in its entirety in the bulletin). On the other hand, having the entire chapter read gave the sermon more context. The sermon itself was a bit dry but engaging. The most memorable line for me was, “Don’t exercise your rights; exercise your responsibility as a Christian.” The pastor preached verse-by-verse through Romans 14, referencing several other scriptures as he went. The screen remained blank the entire time. It would have been helpful to have those other scriptures in front of us for reference.

One caveat to insert: the sermon was about not judging others, which makes me a bit squirmy as I write what feels like a harsh critique of my experience. I hope it doesn’t come across as judgmental. If it does, I ask for your forgiveness.

After the sermon and another song, the strangest thing happened. The announcements. Fifty-five minutes into the sermon, right before communion. Any worshipfulness I had built up to that point was quickly lost as I heard about the church's stewardship efforts and how the budget was doing (a sure turn-off for any visitor). This announcement included an appeal to give more so that the church could avoid a "crisis," not exactly what a visitor wants to hear. After the announcements, offering was collected (but visitors were encouraged not to give, which I really liked). Communion was distributed (I enjoyed taking communion again), a blessing was given, and then the band closed with a rousing worship song. The energy of the song was a wonderful way to end worship, but felt incongruous with what I had experienced leading up to this point.

After worship I was hoping to have some conversations with those sitting around me, but again no one made an effort to greet me except one nice lady, who it turns out was a PK (pastor's kid). My conversation with her was my only true moment of feeling welcomed. I went out to the coffee fellowship table and got a drink, then stood in the middle of the room and watched as people walked around me, talked around me, and did their best not to make eye contact. It was the strangest feeling I think I've ever had in a worship setting.

Needless to say, this was not a positive experience for me and if I was looking for a church I would not return here. In many ways this experience confirms some of the stereotypes I've heard about churches (unfriendly, insiders' clubs, only talk about money). There are several things I take away from this experience:

- Nothing, and I mean nothing, is more important than a personal greeting and welcome. A handshake, a smile and a few warm words makes all the difference. This is even truer if it comes from one of the pastors. It sends the message that I mattered enough for the pastor to seek me out at some point. Thankfully, this personal welcome is something I believe Community Christian does very well.

- If you're going to put something in print, do your best to make sure it is done right. Typos in the bulletin, incorrect instructions on when to stand and sit, and no instructions on how to take communion send the wrong message to visitors.

- Give someone the responsibility on Sunday morning to greet new people. Tell them that their only job is to find someone who's new to the church, welcome them, answer their questions and pay attention to them. I've heard from other pastors that they give people in their church this job and visitors say it makes all the difference.

- Use your signage to point visitors where want them to go. Make main entrances clearly identifiable and highlight areas visitors may want to find (nurseries, restrooms, church information). This is something we need to do better at CCC.

- As pastors, we have to train our congregations to have a heart for reaching new people. It should be hardwired into their spiritual DNA to make a beeline to greet a newcomer on Sunday morning. I preface the greeting time at CCC by saying, "Be sure to introduce yourself to someone you don't know." We have to try and cultivate a culture of hospitality and that means helping everyone embrace their role was a "front door" to the church.

This experience was certainly eye-opening for me. In some ways I think it was much more helpful than visiting a church that does these things well. I'm eager to go somewhere else now and see how this experience compares.

June 22 – Leading Strategically

I want to finish up my thoughts on "Simply Strategic Stuff" before I head off to my Granger conference tomorrow. I've already read "Simply Strategic Growth" and will weave in some of my reflections from that book with my thoughts from the conference, which is on first and lasting impressions. I'm expecting the conference to dovetail nicely with the book.

Before I finish up "Simply Strategic Stuff", I want to share a cool experience. Today, Sydney and I went downtown for my bi-annual MS doctor appointment (he said everything is great!). While we were waiting for our train ride home, we took a seat in the cavernous main hall of Union Station. We noticed a large group of Mennonite youth milling around. They made their way to the end of the hall, stood in formation, and started singing - a Mennonite choir! It was a beautiful sound that echoed throughout the great hall. It was such a neat experience to stand in this bustling downtown transportation hub and listen to these angelic voices sing about the love of Jesus. Very cool. OK, onto the book...

Tip #68 "Design the Biggest Lobby You Think You'll Need, Then Double It" (p. 144) speaks to one of the most pressing issues at CCC. Our gathering area is about the size of a closet and creates a serious bottleneck on Sunday mornings. There's no place for people to gather so they either (1) do so in the sanctuary, disrupting folks preparing for worship, or (2) come late. I truly believe a bigger gathering area would encourage people to come earlier and enhance the community spirit of our congregation. This is a brick-and-mortar project and will require a capital campaign, but this chapter affirms my belief that expanding our gathering area is key to continued growth.

Tip #64 "Money Management Matters" (p. 146) - People trust us with their money and we have to be good stewards of every dollar. We also have to ensure that trustworthy, responsible people serve in our financial positions. But good ones are hard to find. The folks have to be fiscally safe yet not too rigid. They have to approach church finances like a business yet know when that model loses its applicability. They have to be detail-oriented yet open to the work of the Spirit. Filling these positions with the right kind of people is difficult yet key to the success of ministry. We've been blessed at CCC with wonderful financial leadership.

Tip #75 "Teach the Tithe Regularly" (p. 157) - Because of the complaints about church and money, I don't do this well. I try to focus on stewardship in the bigger picture, but I do so at the expense of talking specifically about financial stewardship and giving. I want to change this, but need to find a way to do so sensitively.

Tip #79 "Reward the Person Who Stops a Dead Program" (p. 163) - Or prepare to be criticized if you're that person! There are a few programs at CCC that I believe have outlived their usefulness, but ending them could hurt some feelings. The ground needs to be worked a bit before the program is uprooted. I think I worry too much about the personal consequences instead of doing the right thing and ending a program that has outlived its usefulness.

Tip #83 "Eliminate the Committees and Multiply the Ministry" (p. 170) - Probably my favorite tip in the book. I love the differences articulated between committees and teams. "A committee decides; a team does. A committee is boring; a team is exciting. A committee exists to set policy; a team exists to win. A committee will drain the life out of you; a team will add life to you. A committee is for those who desire status; a team is for those who want to make a difference." This last one is most intriguing. If people in your church aren't seeking status, you may have trouble staffing your committees, which is something we persistently run into at CCC. This is more than just semantics; this is a question of perception. What would you rather do, serve on a committee or be part of a team?

Tip #84 "Surround Yourself with Learners" (p. 172) - I think this is key for all church leaders. I love passing on books, articles and other information to church leaders for the purpose of sharing ideas and starting conversations. I need to work with people who get excited about what they are reading and learning. Ministry is a constant training ground and we have to keep up with what's out there or else we become curators of a museum instead of pastors of thriving churches.

Tip #88 "Give Volunteers an Experience, Not Just a Task" (p. 180) - This and other tips point to the important fact of celebrating and honoring those who serve the church. They are more than just role-fillers; they are people who give their time and energy to live out their faith by serving the church. I'm constantly worried that I don't say "thank you" enough. I'm committed to do that more when I return to work.

The authors consistently emphasize the need to prioritize attracting a crowd through a variety of means, including technology, entertainment and engaging the culture. I wonder what difficulties would arise if you tried to do this in an existing church that wasn't used to it. I imagine to do it well would take a lot of time and education. In Tip #92 (p. 188) the authors encourage us to "put the money where the crowd is," but there are a lot of other ministries in existing churches that also require funding to thrive. If your church doesn't start out with this vision as a part of their culture, making the shift could be a slow (and, for some, painful) process.

I really appreciate Stevens and Morgan taking the time to put all of these ideas into their book. They are not shy about their willingness to share what works for them, and I would guess that hundreds of pastors and churches have been positively influenced by the "Simply Strategic" series. I can't wait to experience the ministry of Granger first-hand. Hey, maybe a they'll have a Mennonite choir performing!

June 25 – Making a Great First Impression

Today was Day 1 of the workshop at Granger Community Church near Mishawaka, IN but it was actually Day 2 of my experience with the church. Let me explain.

I drove over on Tuesday afternoon, checked into my hotel and got settled, and took in a movie ("The Taking of Pelham 123" - very enjoyable). The next morning I got up early (about 6:45 a.m. my time, an ungodly hour for a pastor on sabbatical to be awake), grabbed some breakfast in the hotel and headed for Granger.

I've been looking forward to this conference for months. I have read several books by Granger pastors and know the church's reputation for creativity and innovation. They are doing some cutting-edge stuff with worship, volunteers and welcoming guests. I just knew this conference was going to be amazing!

Which is why I was so surprised at how empty the parking lot was when I pulled up. Sure, I was arriving right as registration was scheduled to start, but surely there would be more people at the conference than this. I made my way into the building and was met by Nina, who was cleaning the glass on the entry doors.

"Hi!" she said. "Can I direct you somewhere?"

"Yes," I said, "I'm here for the workshop."

"Oh dear," she said as she put her hand over her mouth. "You mean the one that starts tomorrow?"

"Crap," I thought. I stayed and talked to the compassionate and sympathetic Nina for a few more minutes then headed back to the hotel.

Turns out my sabbaticalized mind wasn't paying much attention to dates and times and I had arrived a full day early. To show how schedule-deficient I've become on sabbatical, I received an email confirmation last week for my hotel stay for Thursday and Friday nights, and I called the hotel and asked them to change the reservation to Wednesday and Thursday, because I just knew those were the correct dates. How could the hotel have screwed up my reservation? Turns out I should have been pointing the finger at, to quote a recently deceased former pop star, "the man in the mirror."

So I spent the day yesterday reading (see my current book in the right column), seeing movies ("Transformers 2," which felt like two hours of explosions and flying metal shards, as if someone put a bomb in my junk drawer at home; and "The Hangover," which was totally inappropriate guy humor and absolutely hilarious), getting in some treadmill time (2.5 miles - all at once!) and beating myself up for being so stupid. Thankfully I have a very patient and understanding wife who encouraged me to stay the extra day.

So today, I got up in the middle of the night again (at least it felt that way) and headed to Granger. This time there were a few more cars, so I knew I had the right day. I checked in, took a tour of the facility and made my way to the auditorium for worship. There really aren't adequate words to describe Granger. The building is simple: a large atrium, coffee shop, bookstore, administrative offices and the worship space upstairs and all the children's ministry space downstairs. The children's rooms are each decorated with a theme and would be any child's dream classroom. The worship space is dominated by a huge stage with an even bigger screen flanked by two other screens. The worship band was professional quality and I felt like I was attending a concert instead of a workshop. The graphics on the screen were evocative without being distracting and the music was loud but not overpowering. I could easily see myself worshipping at Granger on a regular basis.

But here's the thing: None of the glitz and glam (the worship band, the kids' rooms, the great screens and graphics) would have meant a thing if I had not felt personally welcomed. To a person, every volunteer who was within 10 feet of me made sure to greet me and tell me how glad they were I was there. And I felt like they meant it! Between my car and the registration desk I was greeted five times and asked three times, "Can I answer any questions for you?" Even Nina, my compassionate glass-cleaner, saw me again and said how glad she was I was able to come back. Granger does welcoming like nothing I've ever experienced, and it was awesome. So it's only natural that my workshop today was called "First Impressions" and was led by Mark Waltz, Granger's Pastor of Connections and author of "First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church." Mark comes from a retail background and brings a lot of his marketplace expertise to the church. There was way too much great information to share here, but let me hit a few highlights:

- The challenge of the church is to meet people where they are (the "x" on the shopping mall directory map) and helping them take their next steps.
- We usually decide on a radio or TV station within the first 10 seconds. People will often make similar decisions about a church experience in a relatively short amount of time. First impression matter. Which leads me to wonder: What are people's first impressions of CCC? How can we make those impressions better?
- People are surprised when they get more than what they expect. What are the expectations of guests who visit CCC and how can we give them more than that?
- Someone has to view your church experience through the lens of the guest and then report back, like a "secret shopper" at a store.

- Church people have different expectations of their experience than non-church people. If your vision is to grow and reach new people, which opinion should carry more weight?
- People need to hear that they matter to God. Does a guest's experience leading up to the sermon communicate that fact? Do guests feel like they matter in the parking lot, in the narthex, as they read the bulletin, as they are greeted by the congregation? If they are distracted or perceive a different message, they are much less open to hearing that they matter to God when it's preached in the sermon.
- Volunteers should be trained to help guests have "wow" experiences within their first 10 minutes of arriving. The more the volunteers strive for this, the less likely that the opposite will happen.
- Here's a principle Waltz stated several times that I absolutely love: A leader's job is to catch people doing the right thing and then celebrate it with them. That's awesome!
- Your church has competition and it's not the other churches in town. The competition is any experience your guest has had recently that was excellent, where value was communicated, where they felt they mattered. Your other competition is your guests' own life (sleeping in, reading the paper). After they worship at your church, the guest will ask, "Was my experience of church a higher value than sleeping in?"

The second half of the workshop dealt with inviting (not recruiting) volunteers and training them to provide "wow" experiences for guests. While the afternoon session wasn't as helpful as the morning session, it was still informative to hear how Granger goes about helping their members understand their gifts and finding places for them to use those gifts. I believe CCC could do a much better job of helping members learn how they can best serve the church and I want to study a few models of how to do that.

Tomorrow is the follow-up workshop called "Lasting Impressions," so I'll report back after that. At least I think it is tomorrow. Maybe I should check my calendar!

June 26 – A Lasting Impression of Granger

Today was my second day of workshops at Granger Community Church. Yesterday's focus was on "First Impressions"; today's focus was "Lasting Impressions". We again started the day with a powerful worship experience. If you want to a sense of the quality of music and worship Granger offers, go to gccwired.com and click on "Media Player" on the left-hand side. They have a ton of videos on there from the worship services.

Today's session was very informative and engaging but it wasn't as applicable for me in relation to where my church is at this point. I think we need to focus more on our first impressions before we can adequately address lasting impressions (how you keep people coming back and how you engage them in ministry). Still, there were a lot of helpful nuggets from today. Here are a few:

When thinking about membership and participation, here are some questions we often ask for returning guests:

- How do we get people to join our church?
- What curriculum should we use?
- How do we find leaders for our discipleship small groups?
- How do we measure growth in our people?

How would the responses and our follow-up actions be different if we first asked:

- What are people generally looking for?
- Why do people come in the first place? What got them here?
- Why might people want to stay?
- What are we trying to accomplish with this agenda Jesus left us?

There's a great post by Tim Stevens (a Granger pastor) on his "Leading Smart" blog called, "Hey church, we're just not that into you." It's definitely worth a read and it certainly spoke to me about the expectations my church has of prospective members.

When we put timelines on spiritual maturity, we make the assumption that there is a destination to be reached. The Bible uses "grow" language in relation to maturity.

When asking people to participate, invite them to:

- Be part of something bigger than themselves
- A movement, not an institution – the church's history is good, but are we going anywhere from here?
- Relationship, not a list of rules
- Partnership, not merely a covenant
- Belong to something they want to be part of

Here are some myths associated with volunteering:

- There's no room for me – Cast vision that there's room without sounding desperate
- It requires too much time
- You need to be an extrovert – because you are up front
- You need to be an introvert – because you are behind the scenes
- Only Christ-followers can volunteer
- You must know what you're good at

Keep the menu (the opportunities for people to grow and serve) minimal. They already have a huge buffet of choices in life. Then on Sunday the church hands them another menu, usually on a bunch of multi-colored inserts. We shouldn't communicate, "You should be a part of all of this." We should say, "Pick the one that will help you take the next step on your journey."

Overall, this conference was well worth the money and gave me a ton of great ideas for my ministry setting. I hope I can remember them all when I return! I also picked up a couple books by the workshop leader that I look forward to reading. I would go out of my way to worship at Granger; they are doing good things there.

By the way, remember Nina, the clean-glass lady? I ran into her again today. She remembered that I was on sabbatical and asked me how it was going. She also remembered that I saw "Transformers 2" and asked for a review. And then - get this - she gave me her email address and offered to help if we wanted to set up a "white glove" ministry at our church (a volunteer team that keeps the place looking shiny and clean for guests). Nina didn't have to speak to me again, let alone remember things about me and offer her help. I have a feeling she is just one of hundreds of volunteers at Granger who have been trained and inspired to live the Gospel

through hospitality. I can only hope to apply what I learned in my ministry setting. I was truly blessed by my time at Granger Community Church.

June 28 – Not-So-Stealth Worship

It was difficult to decide where to worship today. I had several churches I want to visit, ranging from small congregations to a mega-church. I finally settled on First Christian Church in Gurnee because (1) it's in my denomination and (2) it's close to my house. Never underestimate the power of proximity. I knew I wouldn't be completely incognito because I know the pastor, David Bonderant, and his wife Sheila, who does the music ministry. Nevertheless, this gave me another opportunity to enjoy worship as a participant and not a leader.

I knew when I arrived that this Sunday was not a typical one for FCC Gurnee. It was the culmination of their Vacation Bible School, and this was the Sunday where the kids and adults presented what they had learned. One of David's first comments to me when I arrived was, "There's no sermon today." I asked him if I should be happy or sad. He just smiled, which is probably what I would have done had someone made that comment to me.

When I arrived I ran into a lady named Theresa, who had visited our church several times about a year ago. I think she felt a bit guilty running into me while at another church, but I set her at ease and told her how glad I was she had found a church home. She seemed very excited to be a part of FCC Gurnee and she enthusiastically told me she had been baptized a few weeks ago. Praise God! God created a wonderfully diverse group of human beings. That's why there are a diversity of churches.

I grabbed a bulletin from the table and took a seat in the back of the sanctuary. FCC Gurnee is a picturesque little church shaped somewhat like a barn. The worship space is small but flooded with light (the only downside is that the videos and images on the wall were almost totally washed out). On this day the side windows were open, letting a nice breeze flow through the space (or was it the Spirit?!?). I was immediately comfortable.

While waiting for worship to start, I was approached by an older couple, presumably so they could greet me and welcome me to FCC. I introduced myself and the man said, "Oh yeah! You're the pastor at Community Christian in Lincolnshire!" So much for being incognito. Turns out the couple, Jim and Sandy Smith, were here from New Mexico visiting their children, where Jim is a retired Disciples pastor. They had visited CCC the previous week, so they knew about my sabbatical. It was an unexpected but pleasant surprise to meet and talk with the Smiths, although I felt myself automatically go into the "welcoming pastor" role. You can take the person out of ministry, but you can't take ministry out of the person.

The worship itself was very upbeat and lively, featuring songs from VBS and testimonials for the workers. While there was indeed no sermon, there were the other elements of worship which I have come to love, such as communion and pastoral prayer. The service ran a little longer than advertised, but on a special Sunday like this that was to be expected and none of the 60 or so people in attendance seemed to mind.

While this wasn't a typical Sunday at FCC, the personality of the congregation was evident. I was greeted several times by smiling faces and warm handshakes and one man (his name was Dave) made it a point to come to where I was sitting and welcome me to the church. While there was no intentional greeting time in the worship, I felt welcomed throughout the whole service. It was a joy to worship at FCC Gurnee today.

June 30 – Saying Goodbye to Welcoming

This is the last day of June and also the last day of the first month of my sabbatical (and, I guess, the first day of the rest of my sabbatical!). Starting in July I'll be focusing on the theme of "equipping," which comes from the part of the church's mission statement which says we are called to "equip people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life." Part of my time in July will be spent reading and blogging about 1 and 2 Timothy. Before I start on that journey, a few closing thoughts on welcoming.

I didn't specifically share on Stevens and Morgan's book "Simply Strategic Growth" because I felt the Granger conference more than covered it. But here are a few thoughts from that excellent book subtitled "Attracting a Crowd to Your Church"...

Granger is unapologetic about using secular culture to attract people to the church. The book gives several examples of this (e.g., Tip #1, "Pop Culture Can Be Your Friend" and Tip #15, "Use Secular Music for Redemptive Purposes") and on their website you can find videos that take off on "Saturday Night Live" skits and Broadway musicals. They are not afraid to engage the culture for the purpose of sharing the gospel. They are also not apologetic for their use of entertainment to bring people in and keep them paying attention (e.g., Tip #6, "Embrace Entertainment" and Tip #54 "Become an Entertainment Expert"). If it's done well, a worship service can certainly be entertaining. Granger does it very well.

Granger is crystal clear* on their goal: To bring people to Christ. Everything revolves around that goal and is filtered through it. A lot of churches can talk the talk, but Granger walks it in every decision they make. Several of the tips in this book drive that point home. I believe a church with such clarity about its vision is an incredibly powerful force for God.

I love how Granger always thinks bigger than it is. When I was there last week, they were talking about their plans to expand their facilities. Most pastors who step inside Granger break the "Do Not Envy" commandment (including me), but they're already talking about wanting to do more. Why? To bring more people to Christ. Churches that truly want to grow have to think like growing churches. Churches aren't going to grow by trying to bring back people they've lost. They grow by reaching out to new people and all their resources are committed to that purpose. It was exhilarating to see a church doing this so faithfully and successfully.

In addition to my reading and conferences, I've also been having an ongoing email conversation with eight other pastors on the theme of "welcoming." Each week I send them a question related to the theme and they respond. It's been a wonderful experience for me. Here's some of what I've learned:

The concept of "welcoming" brings to mind a number of biblical reference, including Abram and Sarai welcoming the strangers in Genesis, the table fellowship stories of Jesus and the Shema from Deuteronomy 6. Welcoming/hospitality is a integral part of the story of God and God's people.

When asked what they do as ministers to address the theme of "welcoming," the answers I got were rich as they were varied. From preaching on the theme to personally greeting and following up with visitors to creating First Impressions teams, these ministers are doing some amazingly creative things to make people feel welcome in their church.

Interestingly, when I asked them what one thing is essential to visitors feeling welcomed in their church, every person said, in one way or another, the welcoming attitude of the congregation and the personal greeting visitors get on Sunday morning. Nothing can replace an authentic welcome to a visitor.

When I asked them to name one thing they would like to do additionally to enhance their welcome, most of them said something like, "Have more people assigned to greet and welcome visitors." While it's important to cultivate an attitude of hospitality within the congregation, it's also important to have system in place to make sure that hospitality doesn't happen haphazardly. Assigning people to be greeters, welcomers, visitor companions, etc., assures that visitors are given the attention they need to feel comfortable.

I've learned a lot this past month about how to help the church be more welcoming. I'm looking forward to getting back to work and sharing these ideas with the congregation. I'm also excited to see what I learn about "equipping" from Paul as he writes to Timothy. Should be an interesting month!

** Pop culture caveat - Name this movie:*

"Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"ARE WE CLEAR?"

"Crystal." (Hint: the preceding line is, "We follow orders. We follow orders or people die.")

July 3 – Still Alive

Sorry for the sabbatical from my sabbatical blog. My in-laws are in town so Leigh and I are taking advantage of the free babysitting to get a few things done around the house. We tackled the basement today, which has accumulated eight years' worth of toys, kids' clothes and who-knows-what-else. I think I saw Elvis. Anyway, we put a dent in getting it cleaned. We can see the floor now - victory!

We also did something today we've never done - we took a walk together. Leigh is an avid walker; I'm more of a saunterer or meanderer. We took about a two-hour walk through downtown Grayslake. It was awesome! I so enjoyed having that time together to talk. For example, we had an in-depth discussion about whether you exercise to get rid of calories or whether you exercise to clear room to add more calories. I argued the latter in between sips of an orange slushee from Tastee Freez.

I have started reading my commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy and should be beginning my comments in the next few days. Tomorrow, we'll celebrate the nation's birthday by doing more cleaning in the basement and, if I'm feeling especially patriotic, putting down the floors in our closet. I'm just a regular Patrick Henry, huh?

July 4 – Hair We Go!

I'm suffering from hair loss. Not the male pattern baldness kind (I'm hoping that gene skipped my generation). For the past six years or so I've had alopecia, which is acute hair loss. I have two small spots on my head (about the size of a quarter - the spots, not my head!) where hair doesn't grow, right in front of both ears. I keep my hair trimmed very short so I can blend in those spots. Otherwise, it looks like I lost control of the clippers and buzzed myself.

Every once in awhile, hair will start to grow there, but usually it falls out after a couple days. In fact, there have only been two times in the past six years when hair has grown there for any length of time. Get this: Both times, it was when I was on a mission trip to New Orleans. For the two weeks I was in the Big Easy, hair grew in those spots. The day after I returned, it fell out. Now, what would cause that? Was it the heat and humidity? The southern climate? The gumbo? I have never been able to explain it.

Now to add to the mystery, hair is growing there again and has been for about a week. Now, it's been humid here, but not any more humid than any other summers. And I haven't had any gumbo. So how to explain it? The only common thread between my New Orleans trips and now is this: I haven't been at work. Granted, mission trips are work, but much different than day-to-day church work. The only conclusion I can draw is not being in the church office is making my hair grow again. One of the causes of alopecia is stress, but I've had other times (e.g., vacations) when I haven't been stressed and wasn't able to grow any peach fuzz. I am feeling pretty stress-free now, all things considered, so maybe that has something to do with it.

I could wake up tomorrow and have those bald spots again, so I'm going to enjoy my impersonation of a Chia Pet as long as I can. I may never be able to sport the flowing Fabio locks that I dream of, but at least I might be able to having something worth cutting. If that doesn't happen, maybe I'll grow my beard like this to compensate:



July 7 – First Meeting with Timothy

I feel a bit guilty that I don't know more about 1 and 2 Timothy, seeing as how they are called the "Pastoral Letters" and I'm a pastor. It's a bit like someone asking the mailman for directions to the post office and having him respond, "Gee, I know there's one around here somewhere." So for the month of July, I'll be spending some time eavesdropping on Paul as he instructs and encourages Timothy in the vocation of ministry.

As a guide, I'll be reading a commentary by Walter Liefeld, an emeritus professor from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, which happens to be located about two miles from my church. The commentary is part of "The NIV Application Commentary Series," which I have used numerous times and enjoy very much. Although the authors tend to be more evangelical I am used to, their insights and applications are quite helpful.

I expect the letters to Timothy to resonate with me because they were written to someone entrusted with caring for a specific congregation, a vocation which I have been called to carry on a couple thousand years later. Granted, Timothy's circumstances were different than pastoring in Lincolnshire, IL. He was sent on behalf of the apostle Paul to deal with specific needs in Ephesus. I doubt he had an expense account or even his own parking spot (OK, I don't have my own parking spot, either, I guy can dream, can't he?). But he and I are still given the same basic charge: bring the Good News to the people. These letters are not about how to be a church; Paul addresses that topic in some of his other letters, which are aimed at congregations. No, 1 and 2 Timothy are about how to be a pastor, straight teaching from the first and greatest evangelist.

1 Timothy 1

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, ²To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I love that Paul designates himself as an apostle. He didn't need a congregational vote, he just did it. That's bold.

"Christ Jesus our hope" - People look for happiness in so many places in our world, sometimes even finding it, but how many places can you look for hope? Hope is in short supply and I believe the greatest source of it is faith, specifically faith in Christ. Because of what he did, we have hope.

Paul throws a lot of theological jargon out in this opening - "faith," "grace," "mercy," "peace." Preaching on a verse like this requires some technical skill because in our day and age we can't assume a level of understanding of these words on the part of our congregation. Different people will define them very differently based on their religious upbringing, lived experiences and current state of mind. I believe every time we say a word like "grace" in a sermon, we need a one-sentence definition. Otherwise, as the commentary author so drolly points out, "To read 'grace be with you' to a person who knows nothing of Christianity can be as meaningless as hearing 'May the Force be with you' is to someone who does not know the American *Star Wars* vocabulary." If we preach as if everyone already has a robust spiritual vocabulary, then we'll be leaving a lot of unchurched people behind, and quite a few churchd ones, as well.

³As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer ⁴nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith. ⁵The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. ⁷They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

In v. 4, Paul contrasts "promoting controversies rather than God's work." But many times promoting God's work is controversial! I know this isn't the kind of controversy to which Paul is referring, but it's true nonetheless.

These passages, and these two letters in general, deal a lot with authority - what it is, how to get it, and how to use it. In these verses, Paul exhorts Timothy to "command" the false teachers to stop what they're doing. In v. 7 he notes that these teachers want the authority that comes with being known as "teachers of the law," but real authority only comes from preaching the Gospel, and the authority of the preacher is but a dim reflection of the authority of the Creator. The authority we are ascribed as preachers is not deserved or earned; it is the gift of trust given to us by the congregation because of the call we have answered. To abuse that authority - whether through false teachings, power trips or moral lapses - is devastating to those who have trusted us and disloyal to the One whom we claim to serve. This is not to say preachers should be perfect, but shouldn't we strive for higher standards? As Paul says, we should seek to live out our calling with "a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

⁸We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. ⁹We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the

sound doctrine ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

I like the phrase "sound doctrine" at the end of v. 10. The Greek word for "sound" is *hygiaino* (no, I don't know Greek, but the commentary author does), from which I presume we get our English word "hygiene." In other words, we should preach a doctrine that is clean, healthy and free of disease. If we preach something else, we threaten to spread a sickness into our congregation, one based on "myths and endless genealogies." Any preaching about the law or any basic doctrine must conform to the gospel. In other words, for Christians the gospel of Christ is the lens through which every other biblical teaching is refracted. If there is incongruity, then the teaching is "contrary" to the "glorious gospel of the blessed God."

But the challenge today is determining what does and does not conform to the gospel. And, maybe more importantly, who makes that determination? I'm sure there are preachers out there who, with good intentions, are preaching a doctrine that I would consider sickly and deformed. And I don't doubt there are preachers out there who would say the same thing about me. So who's right? Only God knows. All I can do is do my best to stay in tune with God and in step with the Spirit, and to preach what I believe in my heart to be the gospel of Jesus Christ. My goal is not to prove someone else is wrong or to prove that I am right; my goal is to be faithful to my calling.

July 11 - 1 Timothy 1:12-20

¹²I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

This is strong self-condemnation from Paul, in contrast to other letters where he boasts of his past achievements. I believe one of the things that keeps people from accepting Christ as their savior is their belief they are not in need of saving. They've never done anything too terribly wrong. It's comforting to see Paul, once the most zealous of Jews, recognizing his transgressions and his need for a Savior.

The implicit consequence of that saving is service. Because God saved Paul, Paul is compelled to serve. God gave Paul strength and appointed Paul to service. We are not saved for ourselves. We are saved for God's work. There's no place for selfishness or self-centered individuality in the Christian life. We are saved to serve.

¹⁵Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. ¹⁷Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

I love the idea that God can take the worst of sinners and use that person to bring God glory in this world. Do we need any more hope than that? Regardless of what we've done, regardless of how far we've fallen, God can not only save us, God can use us to save others.

Why? Because of God's "unlimited patience." God never stops waiting for us to come home. In terms of humanity, God is the Eternal Optimist.

Through our salvation, we become witnesses. Not necessarily in the oral testimonial sense, although that can certainly happen. Instead, how we live our life is a witness to our faith in Jesus Christ. How can we assure others they are loved? By loving them. How can we assure others they are forgiven? By forgiving them. How can we assure others of the abundant grace and mercy God will pour out on them? By living as if we have been the recipients of them ourselves. People are watching us. What do they see?

¹⁸Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, ¹⁹holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. ²⁰Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

The prophecies once made about you - Not long after I decided to go to seminary, my mother shared a story with me, which she had never told me before. When I was born, she said, the nurse cleaned me off and gave me to her. As they laid me on her chest for the very first time, she said she heard a voice say, "My little preacher man." Wishful thinking? Prophecy? Mythologizing of my birth story? I'm not sure. But I think it's a pretty cool story.

One thing we know about Timothy is that he heard his call to ministry through other believers. That may very well be part of the prophecy of which Paul speaks, and it is certainly integral to our calling of ministers today in the Disciples of Christ denomination. I clearly heard my call through other people, who affirmed gifts in me I hadn't seen and illuminated a potential path I had not thought to explore. I think as Christians we have a responsibility to name the gifts we see in others and encourage them to use those gifts in God's service. How many hidden talents are there in our congregations, just waiting for someone to say, "You know, you're really good at that! Do you think you could use that at church?"

I really like the phrase, "...have shipwrecked their faith." Paul knew a little something about shipwrecks. It's a very vivid image for understanding what's happening in Ephesus. How many times in our lives do we sail close to the rocky shores of sin, threatening to shipwreck our faith by one false turn or bad decision?

What does it mean to hand someone over to Satan? Is that like when Paul says God handed people over to their sinful desires? In this verse, it seems to have more a punitive role, as if Satan is going to whack their knuckles with a ruler until they stop blaspheming. Peculiar wording here from Paul.

July 13 – 1 Timothy 2

¹I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time. ⁷And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.

Prayer for leaders - I'm guilty of not always doing this on the basis of believing a certain leader wasn't worthy of prayer. When it comes to politicians, it's much easier to spread scorn and derision than prayer. But Paul is right in his urging here. The world and its governments (even the corrupt ones) are the arena of God's activity, and those government's leaders (even the dictatorial or despotic ones) are God's creation. To not pray for them - or worse, to pray against them - is to make the statement that they are more powerful than God, that God is incapable of working in their hearts. That doesn't mean we shouldn't pray for justice, but we should always be aware that God's will may be different - and probably more merciful - than ours. In addition, not only should we always be in prayer for political leaders, but doing so sends a message to non-Christians about the character of believers.

⁸I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. ⁹I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

While the last section dealt with the content of prayer, this sections deals with the manner of prayer. Lifting hands in prayer was a common Jewish custom, and Paul's point is those hands should be attached to people whose lives are consistent with God's holiness.

Paul's words about women's appearances in worship have been explained to death, so I'm not going to offer any new insights here. My understanding is that Paul is addressing issues that can cause distractions in worship. Women who were all dolled up for a night on the town could be distracting to men who are trying to focus on prayer and worship. In today's world, Paul might offer a similar warning against carrying cell phones in worship. A seductively dressed woman and a chirping cell phone can have the same effect of disturbing the worship atmosphere and distracting worshippers from their engagement with God through prayer. Worship is not about drawing attention to ourselves; it is about pointing beyond ourselves to God. Anything that gets in the way of doing that should be removed.

¹¹A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Like the last section, context is extremely important in interpreting what Paul is saying here. I belong to a denomination that not only allows women to teach but has a number of outstanding women pastors. In fact, I would say a majority of the top 10 ministers I know are women. So what do you do with this passage? You could just ignore it, but that's a slippery slope. You could choose to disagree. Or you could dig deeper into it to find God's truth, even in the midst of a troubling passage.

I choose the last option. You could spend countless hours trying to discern the intent behind Paul's words. Is he speaking about all women in all times or only a select few in Ephesus? What does it mean to "have authority"? Can women teach children's Sunday School but not adult Bible study? At what age is a boy no longer allowed to learn from a woman? These may be important questions to some, but they only dance around the central point, in my estimation.

Obviously, there was a problem in Ephesus. Paul wasn't just lashing out capriciously. Some of the women of the Ephesian church had been duped by the false teachers Paul warned about in chapter 2 and had started spreading that false gospel like a oil spill. Since many people were new converts to Christianity, they were susceptible to this teaching (presumably even more so if the teacher were wearing braided hair and expensive clothes!). This goes back to the core issue of 1 Timothy, which is public behavior and its effect on non-believers. Paul is trying to help Timothy maintain order in the Ephesian church by calling its members to a higher standard of living than the surrounding culture.

July 15 – 1 Timothy 3

¹Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. ⁵(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) ⁶He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. ⁷He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

The term "overseer" is a bit elastic and could apply to a number of different church leadership positions in Paul's time. For the purpose of my study I'm going to equate the term with "pastor." Being a pastor, as Paul puts it, is a "noble task." I like this definition a lot. Over and above all the good and not-so-good things about being a pastor, what we do is noble and therefore we should approach it as such. Yes, it is a job, but it is much more than that, as well. As Paul notes throughout this letter, we are entrusted with authority, and we should conduct ourselves in such a way to honor that trust. We are to act nobly while doing this noble task, not in order to seek status or power, but to be responsible stewards of the gifts and resources with which we've been entrusted.

Husband of only ONE wife? Boy, does that throw off my plans! Better call Winona Rider and cancel our clandestine wedding. Paul sure knows how to toss a wet blanket on a guy's fun. Next thing you know he's going to tell me be temperate.

Seriously, Paul is calling pastors to a higher standard here. I imagine in the pagan culture, Paul saw a lot of behaviors that were the antithesis of what he lists here. While this list is in no way exhaustive, it is representative of the type of life a pastor should lead. I'm sure most, if not all, pastors could find at least one on here they struggle with. Other than the "only one wife" thing, I get caught up on "not quarrelsome" and "not a lover of money." I love a good debate and will sometimes get so caught up in a discussion that I lose sight of the priority of grace and compassion over "winning." As for the money thing, it's important for me to be able to provide for my family, but also to treat myself occasionally. While I don't spend lavishly, I do enjoy having money to spend. In both of these areas, I'm working hard to be more like the person Paul describes and the pastor God has called me to be.

"...and see that his children obey him with proper respect." BWAHAHAHA! I can see trying to explain that to my 10-year-old. "But Sydney, you have to do what I say; it's in the BIBLE!" Cue eye roll.

All of what Paul talks about here refers to the issue of integrity. As he notes in v. 7, "outsiders" are watching us because they know who we are, what we do, and Who we claim to serve. Therefore, lest we become a stumbling block, we are called to live lives worthy of our holy calling. How can we exhort our congregations to lives of holiness if we ourselves aren't striving for the same thing? In my mind, the worst thing a pastor can do is violate the trust he or she has been given by the congregation. We can't be sinless, but we can be morally careful and responsible.

⁸Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁹They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. ¹¹In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. ¹²A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. ¹³Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

The qualities of good deacons don't differ greatly from those of pastors, which says something about the importance of the work of deacons (which included caring for the widows and orphans and collecting money for the needy). I believe at CCC our deacons are severely underused. In fact, the term "deacon" and "usher" are used interchangeably at times, which I find to be a serious devaluing of what it means to be a deacon. Because our deacons also pass out bulletins at the start of worship, the tendency has been to see those people as ushers who also serve communion as opposed to deacons who also do ushering duties. There's a big difference. First of all, "deacon" is a biblically appointed title; "usher" isn't. Secondly, in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we're not big on sacraments. In fact, we only have two: baptism and communion. So the deacons perform one of the sacraments, one of the most important functions in the life of a church.

Other than an occasional Sunday service, we ask very little of our deacons, and after reading Paul's words here, that's a mistake on our part. We don't do anything to "test" them, although I'm not sure what that test would look like ("OK, now grab the tray. Now hand the tray to the next row. Grab the tray. Hand the tray to the next row. Congrats, you passed!"). We'll take just about any warm body willing to serve as a deacon. Because we ask so little, that's what we tend to get. There are a lot of ways I think we can involve the deacons in the ministry of the church. That's one of the areas I want to explore when I return from sabbatical.

V. 9 - Deep truths - Great phrase! The Greek is *mysterion*, literally translated "mystery of the faith." The New Living Translation renders this word as "revealed truth." One of the many paradoxes of faith: the revealed mystery of God.

I like v. 13, because it implies that through service our faith is boosted. If we "serve well," we "gain an excellent standing and great assurance" in our faith. We can't earn greater faith through service, but through service our faith is enhanced. A very James-ian thing for Paul to say!

¹⁴Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, ¹⁵if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. ¹⁶Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:

*He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.*

v. 16 - the mystery of godliness - much like the *mysterion* mentioned earlier. Paul does a poetic job of encapsulating the nature of Christ in this closing hymn. The picture painted of a Christ who was fully human yet fully Other is a fitting reminder to Timothy and this letter's readers of the One whom they worship and serve. It's as if Paul is saying, "Never forget why you do what you do. It's not for glory or status or power or authority or to feel good; you do it because you have been called to do it by Jesus Christ. Therefore, serve in such a way that is worthy of being called by Christ."

July 20 – Shhh!

Hi everyone! Sorry for the blog silence the last few days. I had a bit of a busy weekend and am just now getting my feet back under me. I will get back to 1 Timothy soon, I promise. In the meantime, remember:

If your nose runs and your feet smell, you are built backward.

July 23 – Almost Perfect

I took Sydney to her first White Sox game last night. She's always been a Sox fan (I'm not sure where I went wrong) and I promised her we would go to a game this summer. I figure she can sit through all the Reds games I make her attend, I can endure one White Sox game for her. It was a great night with perfect weather and a White Sox winner. While she didn't get the funnel cake she kept asking for, she did get cotton candy, some fireworks at the end and a souvenir baseball. We sat in the bleachers and had a Pat Burrell homer land about three rows behind us. She was excited because for a split second you can see us on the replay of the homer at MLB.com. All in all, it was a good day.

When I was buying the tickets, I had a hard time deciding between Wednesday's night game and Thursday's day game. I'm a fan of day games, but Syd really wanted to go to a night game. Even though I knew that would put us home late, I went with her choice. If we had done the day game instead, we would have witnessed only the 18th perfect game in baseball history (way to go, Mark Beuhrle!). This is the second time in my life that I've been one game off from seeing a perfect game. In 1988, I went to the Reds game a day after Tom Browning threw his perfect game. Always the bridesmaid....

July 24 – 1 Timothy 4

¹The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ²Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be

rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

Paul's focus here is not so much on the deceivers as it is on the evil powers that cause them to deceive. While it's easy to shirk responsibility by saying, "the Devil made me do it," I believe there is ample evidence that evil forces are at work in our world. No matter how we characterize them - Satan, the devil, evil spirits, demons, etc. - there is evil that goes beyond what the human heart has the capacity to produce. In this instance, Paul says this evil works through human beings, who allow their consciences to be compromised. We have to be on guard against the insidious ways that evil works in our hearts and in our lives.

Christianity is often defined more by what it's against than what it's for. Christianity has developed the undeserved reputation as a no-fun religion - no dancing, no gambling, no R-rated movies. While there are good intentions behind such prohibitions, the message that gets received is that to be a Christian you have to give up all hope of doing anything enjoyable. Paul touches on the extreme asceticism of the false teachers, who place restrictions on such things as marriage and diets. Paul says we are not in the wrong if we receive God's gifts with thanksgiving. Both marriage and food are gifts God has given us, and therefore we are encouraged to partake of them with thankful hearts. We have so many blessings in our lives that come from God. It's much more fun to focus on what we can do instead of what we can't.

⁶If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. ⁷Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. ⁹This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance ¹⁰(and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.

Paul doesn't say that if Timothy points out these false teachings and wrongdoings, he will change lives, grow the church, become famous or make it to Heaven. Paul simply says by doing this, Timothy will be a "good minister." We are called to speak the truth about Jesus Christ for the sole reason that we have been called to do so, and living out that calling makes us "good ministers." We should strive for and be motivated by nothing more than that.

While I was raised by a loving family, I was not "brought up" in the truths of the faith. I didn't really come to faith until college. I wonder how life would have been different if I had been a regular churchgoer from a young age. I saw many of my colleagues in seminary have to unlearn things they had believed since an early age because of flawed theology. I, on the other hand, came to seminary with very little biblical knowledge, making me a virtual clean slate. While I didn't have to unlearn anything, I feel like I have played catch-up ever since. I think this is why I am so fascinated by the Bible. There is so much to learn.

Paul says that physical training is of some value, but pales in comparison to training for godliness. As if I needed another excuse to avoid the treadmill! We are to take care of ourselves holistically, not just physically or mentally. The challenge is to devote as much energy to our souls as we do (or at least believe we should) to our bodies for the purpose of growing in godliness. Anything that detracts from that, even things as seemingly beneficial as physical

exercise, religious study, community service, family time, etc. must become secondary. Acting godly is not a substitute for growing in godliness.

¹¹Command and teach these things. ¹²Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. ¹³Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. ¹⁴Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. ¹⁶Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Ah yes, the defining passage for all young adult ministers. As I get older this passage loses relevance for me. Instead of being the one called young, I am becoming the one doing the calling. Still, I am comparatively young compared to many of my colleagues. I have been heartened in the last few years to meet a number of fantastic young ministers, who I believe will pick up the mantle and carry our denomination forward. While they may be young in age, they are full of wisdom, energy and vision. They are setting the kind of examples Paul mentions here. The church would do well to disregard their age and follow them.

I still remember vividly when hands were laid on me at my ordination. It was a powerful, moving experience. It was also humbling, to have the hands of all these faithful people place on you, entrusting you with the responsibility of carrying on the work of the church. That is an awesome task, one that I have undertaken with joy and, as Paul says, "diligence." Paul calls us to make sure our beliefs and our actions are in concert with one another. If our life and doctrine send contrary messages, we run the risk of doing damage to both ourselves and our followers.

July 25 – Daddy's Girls

I love being a father. It's probably my favorite thing in life. I think God put me here to be a father and everything else is just icing on the cake. I have been blessed with two wonderful, healthy daughters, and I never guessed when I was younger that I would have such great kids.

Sydney decided she wanted to be Daddy's Helper today. We ran a bunch of stuff over to Goodwill then hit Home Depot to pick up supplies for a couple projects around the house. We had to replace a board on our fence as well as the gate latch and she was by my side the whole time, holding tools, helping me measure and being an extra set of hands. I think this was for three reasons, offered in no particular order: (1) she was feeling a bit guilty because her friend broke the fence; (2) she wants a new toy; and (3) she loves me.

When then had to install window well covers because we've had a slew of critters get trapped in ours. So far this week I've rescued four birds and a frog. I'm convinced the only reason we haven't found ostriches and hippopotami is that they tried to get in but wouldn't fit. We got the first one installed by attached a series of metal clips to the plastic cover. It was a bit labor intensive for Syd but she cheered me on nonetheless. By the time we got to the second well cover, we skipped the instructions and just put a brick on top of it to hold it in place. Ingenuity at its best!

Later in the evening, Molly wanted me to play a computer game with her (which she usually asks about 200 times a day). I told her to wait a minute and she said in a very demanding voice, "No, now!" I said, "Well, not when you say it that way." So she replies in this cute high-pitched sing-song tone, "No, now!" I love the way her mind works.

Another Molly story: Last night during dinner we played this game where one of us would think of a state and then say its first letter. The rest of us then had to guess the state. On her first turn, Molly said, "E." None of us could come up with a state that starts with E, so we gave up. Molly said proudly, "Ellinois!" We had to inform her that our state actually starts with an I.

On her next turn, Molly said "L." One of us immediately answered with the only possible state, Louisiana. "Nope," Molly said. "It's Laska." Once again, we had to tell her that it's actually A-Laska.

On her third turn, she was determined to get it right, so she offered an enthusiastic "J!" Hmm. Once again, She had stumped us. We guessed "Jersey," but that wasn't it. When we told her we gave up, she leaned over to Leigh and said, "Is Japan a state?" God bless her little heart, she was really trying hard!

Despite their tantrums, pout fests, whining and constantly asking for things, our girls are sources of unending joy for Leigh and me. If we all survive their teenage years, I bet they're going to be amazing adults!



July 27 – I Timothy 5

¹Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, ²older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. ³Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. ⁴But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. ⁵The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. ⁶But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame. ⁸If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

While the literal context of these verses may seem far removed from modern day, they bring up some thorny questions I've wrestled with since starting in ministry. For example, when it comes to the needy, how do you determine who is worthy of support? Paul is trying to help

Timothy sort out this issue in relation to widows, giving him guidance on how to rate the neediness of each case. I run into a similar issue with our church's discretionary fund. I have about \$100 a month to use for discretionary purposes, which usually means helping people who show up on our doorstep. We have a fair number of drop-ins each week looking for assistance. Some of these folks have become regulars and I have gotten to know them. Because of this, I feel like I can better determine who is truly in need and who is taking advantage of us. For example, I took one man to a local gas station to fill his tank and he asked if I would buy him some things from the convenience store. This man had been rather pushy during our interaction but I wanted to help him, so we went inside. He pick up several sandwiches, chips and drinks ("for his kids" he told me) and then asked if I would buy him cigarettes. Cigarettes?!? Are you kidding? I have people coming to me who are sleeping in their cars and don't know where their next meal is coming from, and this guy wants cigarettes?

I took another lady who is a regular to the local gas station to put fuel in her tank. As I got nozzle out, she shook her head and said, "No, my car only takes premium unleaded." This was back when premium was over \$4 a gallon. And then there's the lady who comes to us quite frequently looking for help. She drives a Mercedes SUV, always has a nice tan, and has manicured nails.

So, who do you help? Who is really needy and who's playing the system? I try to help everyone at least once, but there are some folks I've helped more than others because I trust their genuineness and the urgency of the situation. And there are folks I have turned away, even when we had some help available, because I smelled a rat and wanted to put the discretionary funds to the best possible use. Do I feel guilty saying no? Every single time. But I am a steward of those funds, which have been entrusted to me by the congregation to help those in need. I pray to God that I am using them wisely.

⁹No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,¹⁰ and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. ¹¹As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. ¹²Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. ¹³Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to. ¹⁴So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. ¹⁵Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan. ¹⁶If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

Several times in this passage Paul emphasizes the importance of family members taking care of their own. Those who don't are accused of denying the faith and are called "unbelievers." Those are harsh words from Paul, and are almost impossible to comprehend when viewed through the lens of modern society. Certainly, family members who admit their elderly relative to an Alzheimer's facility for better care aren't denying their faith. But the line between making sure our relatives are cared for and abdicating our responsibilities to them is a blurry one.

This doesn't just apply to elderly relatives. My mother has been dealing with a health issue for several years now that has landed her in the hospital on numerous occasions. Because I live six hours away, I have not been able to be there for her as I would like (and feel I should be). While I know she is getting good care, as her oldest child I feel a strong sense of guilt for not supporting my mom the way she supported me (she was a single parent at age 22). As our parents age (one of the biggest challenges facing families in our church), we will have to wrestle with the tensions brought on by these situations and by Paul's words.

¹⁷The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." ¹⁹Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. ²⁰Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

Having worked with some amazing Elders at Community Christian Church, I second Paul's words here! A double honor hardly seems adequate for the work the Elders have done. It is not a position to be taken lightly, but it also has historically been a notoriously difficult position to fill. This is partly due to the time commitment (Elders serve a three-year term) and partly due to the feelings of inadequacy people feel about being an Elder. I've said to the group many times, "If you feel like you're not qualified or worthy to be an Elder, then congratulations! You're perfect for the job." Being an Elder should be a bit daunting because the position is highly regarded in the Bible. It should be taken seriously. Thankfully, the Elders at CCC are the epitome of the biblical definition of Elder.

²¹I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. ²²Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure. ²³Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses. ²⁴The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. ²⁵In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.

"Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" - In other words, don't be too quick to fill a church leadership position with the first available warm body. Unfortunately, we do this all too often. I believe our church needs to do a better job of helping people identify their gifts and then helping them find a place within the church to put those to use. I think people join our church and then flounder a bit because we don't have a system in place to help move them into participation and leadership. We wait for them to tell us what they want to do. That works for extroverts and the highly motivated, but someone's gift can lay dormant for a long time because the church hasn't invited them to discover it and use it. We need to do better.

July 29 – I Timothy 6

¹All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. ²Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them

even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them.

This passage presents a lot of obvious problems in its tacit approval of slavery. No one in their right mind would condone slavery today, but we do need to acknowledge that slavery was a part of the worldview in which Paul was writing. That's not a statement of approval or condoning; it's simply a fact. Even in a passage that can be seen as archaic and offensive, there is truth to be found. For me, the truth goes back to the theme of a Christian's reputation in the community. If a Christian slave disobeyed, it sent a message about how Christians live out (or don't live out) their faith. Everyone who professes to be a Christian can bring terrible disgrace to the gospel by acting in un-Christian ways. That is true of us today, just as it was true of slaves and masters in Paul's day.

³If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, ⁴he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions ⁵and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. ⁶But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

"Godliness as a means to financial gain" - It's interesting to note that issues Paul and Timothy haven't changed much. Paul could easily be talking about some of the televangelists and "gospel of wealth" preacher who have fattened their pockets on the tithes and offerings of their flocks. It's another example of abusing the authority that is ascribed to church leaders. That authority can be intoxicating, which is all the more reason to hold ourselves to a higher standard.

I like how Paul contrasts "greed" with "contentment," because what is greed if not the desire to attain that which we don't have. And when we get it, we realize it won't bring us happiness, so we go after more and more. Being content doesn't mean living a life of poverty or asceticism, but it does mean knowing that our joy comes not from what we don't have but what God has blessed us with.

V. 9 is often misquoted. Paul doesn't say money is the root of all evil, but the *love* of money. Such an important distinction. If we love money (or possessions or fame) then we are serving two masters. We must love God first and let everything else flow from that relationship. Ultimately, love of money is a statement of distrust in God's provisions. And yet so many churches define their "success" based on budget numbers. I've heard many faithful church members say, "We've got to grow the church so we can meet the budget." While meeting the budget is important, if it becomes the driving motivation behind growing the church, we are giving money way too much priority. If we trust in God, we will be provided for. If we don't meet the budget, then what is God telling us?

¹¹But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

"Man of God" - lack of inclusive language aside, is there a better name we can be called? This title is also used in the Hebrew scriptures for Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah and Elisha. Pretty good company. To say we are men and women of God is to make a statement about who we are and who we aren't. May we all be worthy of such a title.

"Fight the good fight" - Paul is not advocating violence here, but drawing on one of his pet analogies from the athletic realm. Faith is a fight - against the forces of evil in the world, against the ever-threatening culture, against the tendency toward complacency and passivity. A life of faith is a life of striving and action. We're either fighting the good fight or we are sitting on the sidelines.

Paul talks about Timothy's calling here as if it's an ongoing process. Timothy wasn't called once and for all. Instead, each day he is called to fight the good fight, to keep this command without spot or blame. A calling is a perpetual thing. We are not called just to do something; we are called to be something, and that takes a lifetime to get right (which we never actually do). Keep calling me, God. Keep calling me!

¹⁷Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. ²⁰Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, ²¹which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you.

"Guard what has been entrusted to your care" - This is the essence of ministry for me: Guarding what God has entrusted to us. As ministers, we have been handed this precious gift of serving God by serving a specific group of people. God has entrusted us - us! - with this responsibility. The weight of this should never leave the forefront of our minds. Each day, I give thanks for what God has entrusted to me, and I pray God gives me the strength to adequately take care of it. May God's grace be with me and all those who call themselves people of God.

July 29 – Call Forwarding

Well, I was planning on a three-month sabbatical, but God had different plans, and I am both thankful and saddened. I shared this letter with my congregation this week:

Dear church family,

With a mix of emotions and bittersweet feelings, I am writing to inform you that I am resigning as senior minister of Community Christian Church. My last Sunday at Community Christian will be October 25, 2009. Because of this decision, I will be ending my sabbatical early. I will be back in the office on Monday, Aug. 3, and will return to the pulpit on Sunday, Aug. 9.

I am leaving CCC to take the position of Senior Minister at Crestwood Christian Church in Lexington, Ky. This decision is one of the hardest I've ever had to make, but as the discernment process unfolded it was clear to me that God was calling my family and me to a new chapter. I was first contacted by Crestwood in February 2009 with follow-up discussions and visits that have led to this call. While the timing of this call coincides with my sabbatical, let me assure you that I did not use my sabbatical to seek out another church and I hope in the next few months you will see how the church has benefitted from the work I've been doing during my time away.

This move will bring Leigh and me much closer to our families (Lexington is a little over an hour from Jeffersonville) and allow for Leigh to continue building her business in a more temperate climate. In addition, Crestwood Christian Church represents new challenges and opportunities for me in my ministry. I am so appreciative of how the last eight years at CCC have prepared me for this new adventure.

I cannot tell you how hard it is for me to say goodbye to you. I wanted to talk to so many of you personally to share this news because we have built such meaningful relationships serving together these past eight years. You welcomed me into your home, allowed me to share some of your most painful and joyous moments, and called me your pastor. There is no greater honor you could have given me.

You have also loved my family and me, nurtured us in our life and ministry, and prepared us to continue serving God in a new place. There is no way to adequately say "thank you" for all you have done for us. I hope to express that to each and every one of you personally in the coming months.

For now, know that I thank God for this congregation and its impact on my life and ministry. I will never forget what you've done for me. Succeeding pastors at CCC don't know how blessed they will be to serve this church. Community Christian Church is a gift from God, and I have been humbled and blessed to be a part of it. Thank you!

Blessings,

Kory

August 3 – Sabbati...

I've decided to end my sabbatical early. Because of my announcement, I felt it was only right to end my sabbatical and come back to work. I want my congregation to know how much I love them and how much I am dedicated to their well-being and future success as we move into a time of transition. I want to leave in as healthy a way as possible, so I am back to work.

The response of the congregation so far has been wonderful. Most comments have been something like this one: "I have to say that when I first read your letter of resignation as head minister at CCC, that my heart was saddened. You have been key to my becoming a member. I

understand with all my heart why you are moving on. It's great that you are serving God's Will. That's what He wants you to do. You will be an awesome minister at Crestwood. It will be amazing to see what God's Will is for you in this new beginning of yours and your family." The mix of emotions people have been expressing match my own: excitement at the new adventure ahead but great sadness at the thought of leaving our church family behind.

I was talking with Sydney last night about the move and realized that this is the longest I've ever lived in one place in my life, which makes it that much harder to leave. I'm praying that my next move is my last one for a L-O-N-G time.

Today, my first day back, was spent mostly at Children's Memorial Hospital, awaiting news of Grace's brain surgery (it went very well). The wait gave me some good time to talk to Grace's parents, who are dear friends and have been a big part of my ministry at CCC. They are tremendous people and were so supportive of our decision. They are a blessing, as are many people at CCC.

I also talked on the phone to a few church members I had yet to hear from, and both conversations were full of joy, thanksgiving and optimism about the future. This church is going to be healthy for a long, long time because of the wonderful people who are a part of it. What a blessing it has been for me to serve here.

August 9 – This Week's Sermon – Planting, Watering, Growing

(this was the first sermon I preached upon returning to the pulpit after the announcement of my resignation)

SCRIPTURE – I Corinthians 3:4-11

For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

SERMON

Planting, Watering, Growing

I Corinthians 3:4-11

August 9, 2009

Well, this isn't exactly how we expected to come back together, is it? Someone once told me that life is what happens on the way to what we think is going to happen, and I've found that to be true over and over again. I have missed you all very much, and even under the circumstances of my return, it is really good to see you again and to worship with you.

The reason for my early return and my hope for our remaining time together is to help this church move smoothly into a time of transition. We are a healthy, vibrant church, and I want CCC to stay a healthy, vibrant church well beyond my time here. I am committed to doing everything I can to help prepare this church for the future that God has planned for you. I am looking forward to continuing to work together right up until Oct. 25. And then, even as I go, I

trust that God will remain, continuing to be with you, guiding you forward into the next chapter in the life of Community Christian Church.

But that is a chapter that has yet to be written, and that's a bit scary. We don't know what is coming next. Knowledge is power, so when we don't know what is coming, we feel powerless. I know the difficult emotions I have been dealing with the last few months – fear, sadness, uncertainty – so I can only imagine you have felt some of the same. When it comes to our future, we don't want to be surprised. But in situations like this, we don't have a choice. All we do know is that the chapter that is to come is going to be different than the chapters that have come before.

And that means the dreaded “C” word: change. Many of us don't do well with change. I think I'm a bit like Calvin from the Calvin and Hobbes cartoons. Calvin and Hobbes are speeding down a hill in their little red wagon. Calvin shouts to his tiger, “I thrive on change!” Hobbes replies, “You? You threw a fit this morning because your mom put less jelly on your toast than yesterday.” Calvin revises his statement, “I thrive on making other people change.”

One of the great ironies is that we are often so resistant to change, and yet our lives are constantly changing. Author William Bridges says we are in a “semi-permanent state of transitionality,” which is a complicated way of saying nothing ever stays the same. And we don't always like that. I saw a bumper sticker that captures this perfectly. It said: “Change is good. Unless it happens.” It's so easy to get accustomed to the familiar and the comfortable that change can be seen as a negative thing, something to be avoided at all costs.

And yet, everything is constantly changing – our culture, our churches, even our own bodies. Our bodies are undergoing such constant change that, because of cell regeneration, you are a totally new person every five to seven years. So if you don't like someone, wait five to seven years and give them another chance. Science confirms this statement about change. Science has taught us that every living entity is constantly changing. Scientists have even agreed upon a term to describe those entities that are not undergoing constant change. That term is “dead.”

We are changing people who live in a world of change, and that can be scary, especially when change comes about unexpectedly. But the Bible tells us we are not alone because we worship a God of change. God says in Isaiah, “See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare.” The psalmist encourages to, “sing to the Lord a new song.” Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians that if anyone believes in Christ, they are a new creation. Like Calvin, I believe God thrives on making people change.

And there's good reason for that. Newton's first law of physics is that a body at rest tends to stay at rest. And you know what happens if you stay too long in one place. If I've sat in a chair too long, when I stand up my knees snap, crackle and pop like a bowl of cereal. A body that stays at rest finds that to be a pretty comfortable place, and will resist being moved from it, much like my knees resist being put into action.

I believe God applies that principle to us as people and as a church. A church body at rests tends to stay at rest, which is the opposite of movement. A church at rest is a church that isn't moving, isn't growing, isn't striving to progress in faith and service. A church at rest is antithetical to the definition of who we were called to be people.

As early as the Garden of Eden, the God of change put people on the move. He came to Noah and said, “You're moving! Build an ark.” He came to Abraham and said, “You're moving! Pack up your things.” He came to Moses and said, “You're moving! Head to Egypt. Take your swimsuit.” He came to the Israelites and said, “You're moving! Don't forget your sunscreen.” The life of faith is life on the move.

I saw a cartoon once with a husband and wife on the back of a camel, trudging through the desert. The wife keeps asking, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” The man turns around and says, “We will never be there, Dear. We’re nomads, remember?” As followers of Christ, we are nomads, never called to be at rest, but to always be on the move.

That’s the truth I’ve discovered over the past few months. Before this new call came, my family and I weren’t planning to move. We love it here, we love this church. We were comfortable. But God came to us and said, “You’re moving! I’m sending you to a land flowing with milk and honey, or at least bluegrass and horse manure. You’re going home.” And now, there’s a For Sale sign in our front yard and we are beginning to contemplate the reality of saying goodbye to the best church family we have ever known.

Even as challenging as this concept of change has been for me, I’m very aware of the challenge it presents for you, as well. You may not know this, but churches don’t tend to do change very well. In a world that is constantly shifting like sand around us, church should be the one constant, the one place to find stability, the one thing that doesn’t change. And then the pastor resigns and even church is no longer safe from change.

But here’s another paradox for you (you know I love that word!) when it comes to this: the God who thrives on making people change doesn’t change. I don’t mean that God is frozen or that God is unresponsive to us. What I mean is that God’s character is consistent, that God’s faithfulness is enduring. That’s why the psalmist can talk about God as a rock and a fortress, our ever-present companion during times of change. That’s why the author of Hebrews writes in Ch. 13, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” The church is a human institution, which means it’s going to be subject to change, just as any other human institution. But the foundation of that institution, the God in whom we place all our trust and hope, is not going to change, will never leave us.

In fact, I’m not even sure the word “change” applies in this case. Sure, on a surface level things are changing. I’m leaving, someone else will be coming in, leadership changes, ways of doing things will change. But at a deeper level something more fundamental, more exciting is happening. What the world calls change, God calls “transformation.” We change our clothes; we transform our souls. Any time of transition has the potential for transformation.

The question we can ask is: if we are changing, what are we changing into? If we are transforming, what are we becoming? We know something is ending, and because of the strong emotions associated with that, we tend to forget that this means that something new will be beginning. And in the meantime, we enter into what William Bridges calls “the neutral zone,” the time between endings and beginnings which he describes as a “transformative experience.” We may be afraid of that transformation because we don’t know what we’ll look like on the other side of it, but God assures us that God will be with us as we go through the process. Because we know this, we can lean into the future, eyes wide open, looking for ways to continue our journey of faith, expectant about what God is going to do through us.

This is what Paul is talking about in the passage from 1 Corinthians. Different leaders in the church have different roles to play in how that congregation develops. For the Corinthians, Paul planted the church and Apollos watered it with his teaching and preaching. For this church, you could say that Don Lanier planted the seed, Nelson Irving watered it, others have provided sunlight or nourishment. And there may be a few weeds mixed in there. I hope my time with you has been a time of blossoms and bountiful harvests. But the truth is that, no matter what we contribute to the nurture of the church, it is God who makes it grow. Pastors and church leaders

come and go, each doing their part. But it is our ever-present God who is constant and abiding, encouraging growth and nourishing us.

That's why I think you could argue there are no endings in our faith, because every ending is a new beginning. Jesus' ending on the cross provides some pretty strong evidence for that, doesn't it? Endings lead to beginnings. Death leads to new life. My leaving means new leadership, new energy and new directions. Our time together is short, and that makes me very sad. Once I leave this place, I will be praying for your continued growth in faithfulness and service. I'll be watching eagerly to see what you will become. But until then, we have a lot of work to do together as we prepare for the transformation. I love you, I am committed to serving you, and I am excited about your future. I believe God has amazing things in store for Community Christian Church, and I want each of you to be part of it. Our unchanging God is calling us to change, and that is a good thing. Thanks be to God.

SABBATICAL CONVERSATIONS

Original Sabbatical Plan

One of the goals of my sabbatical was to draw upon the knowledge and resources of my ministerial colleagues to help me better understand what it means to live out our mission statement. Each week, I sent a question to eight pastors related to our mission statement. The following pages contain their responses. In some cases, I have **highlighted certain words or phrases** that I felt were particularly applicable to Community Christian Church.

Participants

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Rev. Dawn Darwin Weaks

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Raytown Christian Church
Raytown, MO

Rev. David Shirey

Senior Minister
Coolwater Christian Church
Cave Creek, AZ

Rev. Kathryn Palen

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Central Baptist Church
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Rev. Dave Yonker

Senior Minister
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June - “We are called to welcome people into a loving and caring family”

June 1

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this conversation with me! I'll be exploring more deeply what it means for us to follow our mission statement by looking at the three foci of the statement. For June, the focus will be on:

“We are called to welcome people into a loving and caring family...”

This week's question is this:

What biblical images/stories come to mind when you hear this statement?

Ryan: *The one the pops to mind again and again is Abraham, sitting under the oaks at Mamre, sees the strangers in the distance. Before they are even close enough to make out distinguishing features to recognize them as friend or foe – he jumps up and runs to greet them. Then, and here's the best part that would NEVER happen at my house, WITHOUT ASKING SARAH, he invites them to dinner. I'm just guessing the adding to the guest list in that time was not an inconsequential matter since Kroger was not yet open 24 hours. No matter – they are invited, welcomed and entertained. It is like they were expecting company.*

Then there's the Hebrew's passage...entertaining angels unaware...

Bruce: *Ruth and Naomi show love and care for one another
Mary and Martha welcome Jesus
Abraham & Sarah welcome the strangers
Jacob and Esau reconcile after Jacob crosses the Jabbok river
Jesus calms us to feed the hungry ... (etc.)*

Dawn: *Genesis 18 with Abraham welcoming the angels/God into his home and Sarah doing the cooking!*

Kathy: *Surprisingly, I thought of 1 Thessalonians in which Paul describes this young group of believers as a family and encourages them to love **each other more and more**. I don't tend to be a huge fan of Paul's, but while leading a study of this epistle this spring, I was surprised by the tenderness that Paul expresses to this community of believers. He notes what they do well--stand firm in their faith despite persecution and love one another. But he also encourages them to continue doing more and more. It's a reminder to me that faith is a lifelong journey--and that includes how we manifest our faith in our congregations.*

Roger: *Matthew 10:14*

Normally I wouldn't think of a verse like this except my sabbatical mind is going against the grain in some ways. When Jesus sends out the "advance" team to alert them to the coming Kingdom of God, he makes a point of identifying which homes welcome them and which don't.

The simple point is that there is a basic hospitality that is related to someone being able to receive the message & the Kingdom of God. The implications are enormous.

Becky: Scripturally, I think of the words of the **Great Shema** (Deuteronomy 6:4-5): “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.” If God is our Creator, our Lord, and we each love God in a most complete way (as is commanded above) then we will authentically and passionately desire to welcome others as a part of what God has already created. Jesus Christ is the head of “our” family—we are not. We simply affirm and encourage others when they realize it is “their” family, too.

Musically, the old hymn that says, “I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God” rings out through the ages.

Artistically, I see open hands, palms up (“He’s got the whole world in his hands”) as well as Michelangelo’s painting, “Creation of Adam”, which shows God’s hand reaching out to Man.

David: My response will be a bit free-flowing--

*I think of all the **table fellowship stories of Jesus** and the conversation and teaching that emerged from those occasions (dining with the scribes and Pharisees, “When you have a banquet, invite the poor...,”*

I think of the Mephibosheth story in Samuel when King David makes a place at his table for the crippled son of Jonathan and all the hospitality that represents

I think of the word “hospitality” and the biblical and cultural expectation from biblical times that we open our tents/ tables/ homes to all who come our way.

I think of the Table itself, of course, and the wonder that we all are welcome there.

I think of the hymn “All Are Welcome”

June 8

“To welcome people into a loving a caring church family”

This week’s question is:

How do you as a minister intentionally address the theme of “welcoming/hospitality” in your church?

Dawn: *Our church had no **greeters** when we came; we addressed that and it has made a big difference!*

Russ: *1) **Identify and affirm the presence of welcoming moments and ministries.** I tend to follow this principle in all areas of ministry. When dealing with welcoming, I have yet to serve a church that had absolutely no tendencies or practices of welcoming. As you affirm and celebrate the presence of what you seek you necessarily help people claim welcoming as a value. 2) **Model what you seek.** Try to take advantage of opportunities to welcome people.*

Becky: As a minister I intentionally address the theme of “welcoming/hospitality” by (in no particular order except how they popped into my feeble brain!):

- **Designated Welcome Center** in front lobby
- Welcome Folder of info about First Christian Church, Sullivan (FCCS)—This has been sent to print and will be at the Welcome Center as well as available to mail out.
- **Greeters** at the front door who ask guests to sign the guest register
- Welcome pads in the pews to obtain attendance info from members/attendees and contact info for guests (during announcements we invite all to sign and pass down the pew)
- Welcome gifts that I hand-deliver to guests on Sunday afternoon. This is a screen-door visit only—if they invite me in, I tell them I just wanted to drop off the gift but would be happy to set a time to talk with them at another time. The gift is just a bag of microwave popcorn in a gift bag with a handle (so it can be hung on the door if no one is home) and a note saying we just “popped by” to say “hi”. Yeah, I know it’s corny (oops, another pun!) but at least it says we are thinking of them.
- Guest-friendly bulletin
- “If you are new to FCCS” cards in the pews which give general info about the worship service (esp. communion—open to all who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, offering—act of worship, if you are a guest your gift is welcomed but not expected)
- During Communion I reiterate that all who are followers of Jesus Christ are welcome to partake.
- Refreshment time after worship; explain how to get to Fellowship Hall
- Instructions to Elders to engage guests in conversation before and after worship
- **Book studies with Elders** like “They Love Jesus but not the Church” to bring an awareness to the table
- Three-Year Ministry Vision Plan that emphasizes welcoming
- Hand-written notes to all guests on Monday morning
- Reiterate to CE leaders about how to welcome guests during VBS, Sunday School, etc.
- Remind all Ministry Team Leaders of their role in welcoming people (Property Team seems to have the most difficulty in seeing the connection but we have placed directional signs outside in the parking lot and inside the building.)
- Website is kept current (most of the time J -- I’d like to revamp the look of the website)
- Currently preaching a series on various aspects of worship: music, prayer, offering, communion, etc. Will continually emphasize the needs of our guests in all those aspects which occur during our worship service.

Those are a few things. It is basically in everything I say and do within the church leadership/congregation—**how does this impact guests? What will guests need in this situation?** Etc. There are lots of things we need to do to improve. One lady on our Evangelism Team previously attended a church which assigned a member/couple to be the welcoming person(s) for a particular guest/new member. They always had someone to sit with, to introduce them, etc. until they developed relationships on their own.

I also remembered that we spruced up the bathrooms (they had created a Family Bathroom before I arrived which contains a changing table and room for a wheelchair—BYW we do have wheelchair accessible seating and our entire building is accessible) and we are in the process of

sprucing up the Nursery. You probably know that researchers say these are the two areas which influence guests' first impressions.

Roger: There are a variety of things that we do to try and create an hospitable environment. In no particular order, here are some of them:

- 1. We avoid the use of the term "visitor" and **refer to them as guests**. The former conveys the expectation they might not come back.*
- 2. We have a "**First Impressions**" **team** that schedules greeters, trains them, provides an umbrella to assist people on rainy days, opens the door for them and answers the guests questions as they arrive. They also provide for them a packet that has our most popular brochures, a free book, and information about the church. They provide a coffee bar with refreshments that is open all morning. On stand-up tables (3) in the lobby, there are see-through cubes that have scriptures, great thoughts, and inspirational verses that are changed weekly to coordinate with the message.*
- 3. Our elders are designated to do **out-the-door greetings to people as they leave** and make sure they have either signed our guest book or filled out a card from the folders that are passed.*
- 4. Names and addresses of visitors are sent out each week to our "writers" who send welcome notes and letters to every visitor.*
- 5. I send a pastoral letter of welcome including an invitation to our Pizza with the Pastor that is held every month to introduce them to our church in more specific ways beyond what they see in worship.*
- 6. On a larger scale, our church developed an hospitable culture when it started and we have continued to foster that. We teach regularly from the pulpit and in community groups that there is a difference between being friendly and being welcoming.*
- 7. My wife (pastor of growth ministries) tries to make contact with people who have come more than once and help them get anchored in a community group to get to know people better.*
- 8. **Our worship is designed to help people not have to guess what is going on.** Enough is put in the bulletin to give an order and specific instructions for particular parts of the service. People are asked to greet each other most Sundays and the music is varied so they have a high probability of knowing something that is being sung.*
- 9. Scriptures are put on a screen as well as Bibles in the rows of chairs for people's use.*

David: One of my first answered prayers at our new church start was the presence of a man whose gift is hospitality and welcome. I made a time to have lunch with him and said, "Eph, I want you to do one thing on Sunday morning. Just stand by that door and welcome everybody who comes through it." To this day, one of the things many of our return visitors say is, "We were warmly welcomed here by that man at the door." If it's true there are no second chances for first impressions, we are well positioned for a good first impression simply by Eph's presence at the front door.

I also work the the theme of an all-inclusive welcome into many of my sermons. I don't stand on a soapbox and talk about being "open and affirming," (we haven't formally adopted that phrase) or "anti-racist, pro-reconciling" or anything like that. Rather, I weave into my sermons on a regular basis the Gospel imperative of a wide-armed welcome to one and all.

Each week at the Lord's Table a statement is made about all being welcome here.

We occasionally review the manner in which first-time visitors perceive us by going through everything that might happen from parking lot to parking lot-- i.e., Exactly how will this person experience a warm welcome from the time they arrive to the time they leave? I ask return visitors how they experienced our welcome.

When a visitor is with us, I may go to one of our members who may have a similar age/ background/ affinity and ask him or her to be a sure and introduce themselves to that visitor.

During our welcome time immediately after the Invocation our people really do go out of their way to greet others.

Bruce: First of all I believe a pastor must practice "welcoming/hospitality" in the way they minister.

- 1. I tell phone first time worshippers within the week after they worship with us. I often hear from them that I was the only one to make contact with them. After their second Sunday with us I attempt to make a face-to-face visit. The success of that is completely up to them.*
- 2. I seek out those who are new to the church to visit with them or sit with them at the fellowship dinners etc.*
- 3. I reach out to every member with love and care. If I cannot get to them I make calls and check on them.*
- 4. Of course I preaching and teach in every way I can to reach the goal of being welcoming and hospitable.*

Second, our members are extremely welcoming and are wonderful hosts.

- 1. We have **door greeters and hosts** to give them a tour if they are interested.*
- 2. We have people who are wonderfully friendly and open to those who are new.*
- 3. We have welcomed people of all lifestyles with Christian love. Most recently we had a young man who was in work release with the department of correction and he was warmly welcomed by the church and given our support. Members shared their family experiences with prison time etc. The family that came with him were greatly impressed by our "welcoming/hospitality."*
- 4. We are constantly re-evaluating our care and love. Has anyone fallen through the cracks and been missed. Of course we find problems, but we accept our mistake and work to fix the problem a.s.a.p. and look for practices and procedures to correct the problem to hopefully see that it does not happen again.*

*Dave: So, how do I intentionally address the theme of welcoming and hospitality in our church? Well.... we are very fortunate in that of all the things that first and second time visitors say about our church, everyone says that we are very friendly. **There is not a visitor who comes to our church who does not get spoken to by at least 5 people.** I am very lucky in this regard because I know this is not always the case. Over the past year, we have been working very hard at evangelism. Any visitor who comes to our church gets a hand-written letter from me early in the week. They also get a "welcome bag" on Monday or Tuesday that includes brochures about the*

Disciples, our church and programs (adult and youth), a book mark, pencil, magnet, and a loaf of homemade banana bread. This is something new that we have started within the last few months. We have also started posting greeters at all our outside doors. Since our church is kind of spread out and we have four main entrances, we have a greeter at each door 30 minutes before the 10:15 worship begins to greet everyone who comes in, members and visitors alike. Each greeter wears a name tag and has been through our training about body language and first impressions.

*On a personal level, I do my best each Sunday to speak not only to the usual crowd, but to anyone who might be new. **We try not to use acronyms too often;** we have a note in the bulletin about where Children's Church is (who can go, and what it is), and we have a note about how to take communion. Since not everyone has been with us for 45 years, we have to look at it from the eyes of someone who with us for the first or second time. What do they see that we have overlooked?*

Ryan:

1. Randy has always said that the most passionate people about welcoming/evangelism/hospitality are the newest people. They have a passion for what they've most recently experienced at church and are the ones who are going to be out telling friends and talking you up. Our newest people are the ones that are working the welcome centers.

*2. There is an **expectation of growth** that comes from preaching, board, attendance tracking (with charts and graphs) and visitor tracking (through a system that puts visitors into a "visitor category" that is based on where they are in the "visitor journey to membership." We spend 30 minutes of staff meeting with this visitor tracking report – what did they look like, who do they know, what other connections can we make for them.*

3. We have welcome centers at both locations that people have to trip over to get into the worship space. Gift bags have information about the church (but not overwhelming) and chocolate!

4. We use attendance/prayer cards in the pew racks that everyone is supposed to use every week. It models for guests that they also need to fill them out.

*5. **Everybody wears the same kind of nametags** – the "fill it out with a Sharpie and stick it on kind."*

6. There are lots of other little things – i.e. ministers, choir, deacons all park in the worst parking spaces.

Kathy: *Here are some of the ways that I address the theme of "welcoming/hospitality" in our congregation:*

- *Preach on the theme.*
- *Write about the theme in my newsletter columns.*
- *During different seasons of the church year, include a time of "welcoming/greeting" in our worship services.*

- *Design churchwide events (i.e., dinners, retreats) to include components during which "new" people have a chance to get to know others within the congregation.*
- *As new people enter the congregation, introduce them to specific members of the congregation with whom I think they might share things in common.*
- *Hold "Getting to Know CBC" sessions for people who are interested in finding out more about our congregation without having to make too much of a commitment.*
- *Remind boards/committees of the importance of community building among their members. (Try to help them avoid assuming that everyone knows everyone else.)*
- *Hold "Welcoming Sunday" celebrations a couple of times a year.*
- *Communicate individually with people who visit our congregation.*
- *Design printed materials that tell about our congregation.*
- *Try to make sure that announcements in our bulletin, as well as other printed and oral information, **don't sound "insider."** (For example, "If you would like to volunteer to help with the festival, call Dave." Maybe everyone who's been at CBC for years knows who Dave is and how to reach him, new people won't have that knowledge.)*
- *Include the words to elements, such as the Lord's Prayer, in our worship service in the bulletin. (I don't want to assume that everyone who visits will know those things, and I don't want them to feel uncomfortable.)*
- *Try gently to help people within our congregation understand that they are not always as "friendly" as they think they are. (Give practical examples of how we can show greater hospitality.)*
- *Have developed a series of events during the past year to invite the community into our congregation in non-threatening ways. We plan to expand those events this year.*

June 15, 2009

This month's theme is: "To welcome people into a loving a caring church family"

Complete this sentence: The one program/ministry/action at my church that is absolutely essential to visitors feeling welcomed and wanting to return is _____.

Roger: ... *the **welcoming attitude of the congregation**. This is followed closely by the cards and notes that they received in the week following their first visit. When we have our monthly Pizza with the Pastor gatherings, we do a survey to find out why they came back in addition to why they came to begin with. Overwhelmingly, they felt most welcomed by the congregation. Note: This was not due to any directed "turn and meet your neighbor" or the greeters at the door. Those are very important, but what seems to matter most is the natural interaction that takes place in unstructured time.*

Ryan: ...***people that love their church** and what's happening there AND competent, passionate people working the welcome centers (OK, I cheated, that's two).*

Becky: *If I had to nail it down to one thing, it has to be the **welcoming attitude of the congregation**. Of course, that includes specific welcoming behaviors.*

Beyond that, I'd have to say that I receive a great amount of positive feedback about the hand-written notes that are sent to guests (I send one and someone on the Evangelism Team sends one) and the screen-door visit with a gift (Bill Easum says this is a necessity and for small congregations with AWA under 300 or 500—I really don't remember—it should be done by a pastor).

*Kathy: A **personal connection that someone in the congregation makes with them**. It can be as simple of someone introducing himself/herself or inviting the person to our coffee hour or seeing if they have any questions. While I always try to make this connection, it is helpful is at least one other person in the congregation does so, as well.*

*Dawn: **at least 2 people saying a warm hello** to them who are NOT the official greeter or minister, that's the essential. I often "send" these people over to say hello but a few precious ones take initiative and count this as their personal ministry each Sunday*

*Dave Y.: "The one program/ministry/action at my church that is absolutely essential to visitors feeling welcomed and wanting to return" is the **Friendship Moment during worship**. After the announcements and before the Call to Worship, we take a moment to greet our neighbors. This is key because for those who are visitors because during the Friendship Moment they are greeted by everyone around them. Just last Sunday there were some folks with us for the first time and during the FM, I saw at least four couples come up to them and welcome them to our church. You'll never have the experience of not being spoken to our at our church.*

*Bruce: The one program/ministry/action at my church that is absolutely essential to visitors feeling welcomed and wanting to return is **systematic contact from the pastor and laity alike**. People are greeted and welcomed the first time they walk through the doors of the church. Most are directed to a seat and introduced to those sitting around them. Most of our members then carry on the conversation before and then after the service.*

I then telephone all first time visitors the week after the visit and the evangelism team tries to make a drop by visit to their home. After their second time in worship with us I try to set up a face to face visit if they are interested.

When I make my first call to these visitors I nearly always hear how friendly and caring we are at FCC. They tell me stories about the other churches they have visited and the news is usually not good. I often hear that no one spoke to them.

The reasons I hear most often for people NOT returning are "our theology does not match theirs" (most of the time we are too liberal, but there are those who think we are too conservative) and the music (we are not traditional enough or we are not contemporary enough). It is funny that it cuts both ways.

The personal contact to me is the most essential action we take to get people back for a second look.

David S.: *The presence of Eph Calbert standing at the entry door week in and week out. Eph has a way of welcoming each and every person in a way that leaves an indelible mark of open-armed hospitality. He is the first impression visitors have of our church and I can't think of a better one than his welcome.*

June 22, 2009

This month's theme is: "To welcome people into a loving a caring church family"

If there was one thing we could do differently/additionally at my church to make us more welcoming, it would be _____.

Roger: *If there was one thing we could do differently/additionally at my church to make us more welcoming, it would be keep what we are doing and add a couple of things. In addition to our Pizza with the Pastor, I want to start some mid-week teaching that includes "How to become a Christian" and "What it means to become a member." We are presently ramping up a personal financial health program that will also be a good invitational program. These all fall under the category of what Andy Stanley would call "living room experiences."*

Becky: *However, the one thing I would like to add is **people to serve as hosts to new attendees**. If someone is showing regular attendance (after 2 or 3 or 4 times?) then a host would be assigned to them. The host would invite them to other church events, fellowship time, Sunday School class etc.—offer to pick them up, meet them at the door, introduce them to others. You get the idea. One lady here said their former church in Decatur (not a DoC church) did that and it made a great difference in getting people assimilated into the life of the church. It makes sense to me. Even as the pastor it is awkward to attend church somewhere else by myself, and I basically know what to expect. But like you, I have to find the right door, etc.! I can't imagine how much tenacity it takes for a person to come to a church by themselves or come to a church if they usually don't go to church. That tells me that the guests who show up must really be seeking for a connection. Anyway, we've had other pressing issues in the realm of welcoming but this one is making its way to the top.*

Bruce: *We do pretty well interacting with the visitors, but we need **even more members who would be willing to meet and greet members at the door**, sit with them at worship and over events, and to be willing to meet them outside of church for meal, coffee etc. Since this is a priority for me I am not sure we can ever do enough to reach out to those outside the church.*

David: *I think one key additional thing we could do would be to **designate/ appoint another person beyond our "door welcomer" to intentionally look for and speak personally with guests**. That second level of personal contact is, in my estimation, key.*

Dawn: ***Every person in the congregation would care more about new people's experiences at our church than our own.** Our church is quite far from that.*

Short of that, it is having key lay leaders and all of staff zoned in on caring more about new people's experiences than we do about the constituents who pay us. This I waver on myself but when I do it, I feel like a real minister.

Ryan: *Wave my magic wand and let **everyone be “geared for evangelism.”** As you’ve found in your visits, you can do a lot of stuff – building, gifts, etc. – and still be the most unwelcoming environment ever because of the attitude of people.*

Dave: *If there was one thing we could do differently/additionally at my church to make us more welcoming, it would be to **continually get the word out in our community** of what is going on. There is a nice buzz about us in our small town (it's pretty cool having two pastors under 35 with some good youth programs going), but like everything but we could always do more.*

Kathy: ***Redesign our church Web site.** I believe more and more people get their first impression of congregations by visiting Web sites. Our current Web site is anything but welcoming. It's static and dated. It does nothing to reflect the vibrancy of our congregation or help people get a sense that they would find anything meaningful (from community to worship to faith formation) in our congregation.*

July - “We are called to equip people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life”

July 6

This week’s question is this:

What biblical images/stories come to mind when you hear this statement?

Bruce: *The Vision, Mission, and Imperatives
First Christian Church
Peoria, Illinois*

*Our Vision is:
To follow Christ in all aspects of our lives*

“It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

*Our Mission is B-E-S-T
To Become love of Christ,
to Embrace the love of Christ, and
to Serve in the love of Christ
Together.*

God calls us to: (Our Imperatives)

□ *Become a Christ-centered community where all are unconditionally loved, accepted, and respected.*

(James 1:19; John 13:34 & 35)

□ *Embrace a hunger for Christ's Word through worship, study, and sharing our personal faith relationship with Christ.*

(John 6:35; II Timothy 3:16)

□ *Serve others as Christ serves us.*

(Mark 10:45; Philippians 2:5)

□ *Be Together, one with Christ and one with each other.*

(Colossians 3:14; Galatians 3:27 & 28)

Becky: When I first read your statement I thought of the **woman who touched the hem of Jesus' robe**. She had a spiritual and practical faith, one that worked in her real life because she was healed! I thought of Joseph whose faith eventually led him to great success and through his success he was able to help his family.

The questions I ask are...what does a "Christ-centered faith that works in real life" look like? What kind of disciples do we want to "make" and what does it take to equip them?

David: *Ephesians 4:11-16 "equip the saints for the work of ministry"*

Luke 10:1ff Mission of the Seventy

The Sermon on the Mount

The Great Commission

John 15

Romans 12:1-2

For whatever reason, the letters to the seven churches in Revelation are coming to mind as instructive-- Christ-centered for sure, but also the commendations or criticisms are grounded in their various contexts of ministry.

Dave: When I hear about "equipping people" I automatically think of Ephesians 4:11-12, "The gifts that he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up the body of Christ...." This is one of my favorite passages. We are called to equip the people in the pews so that they may do their work in building up the body of Christ. Quality stuff!

Kathy: *I probably should begin with a disclaimer. I find the term "Christ-centered" to be a stopper. (It probably has to do with my low Christology.) Somehow the term feels either loaded or just thrown in to me.*

OK, now to answer your question:

--Taking up our cross.

--Inviting people to "come and see."

--Welcoming the children (which for me includes anyone who is marginalized).

--the story of Mary and Martha (in which Jesus addresses the need for balance).

--Jesus' use of the term: "But I tell you. . . ." (Reminds me that just when I think I have something figured out, the divine message can turn that upside down.)

Roger: *Oddly enough, the story that comes to my mind on this one is when Jesus is faced with 5000 plus people who are hungry. The disciples ask him to go somewhere else because this place is "lonely":) He says, "You feed them."*

The reason this comes to mind is because I don't believe faith development is strictly about knowledge or information. It is often being thrown into the deep end of the pool and asking people to risk the faith they have and dip into what they already understand and trust.

July 13

"Equipping people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life."

Assuming that the essence of this statement is an important focus of the church, how do you know when a church is effectively doing this? What signs should we see?

David: *In your response to this week's question, I'm sending two attachments.*

"Grow Words" is data from a survey we did last year. A line in our mission statement reads: "Invite people to grow as Jesus' disciples." The survey asked people to give us one word descriptions of what a growing disciple "looked like" as well as asking them what in particular would help them grow as disciples.

The top five were "wants to learn more," "listening," "attentive," "helping others" and "dedicated"

Kathy: *--Sermons that on a regular basis invite people to reflect on what difference the biblical message they've heard can/should make a difference in their daily lives.*

--A mix of programming that helps people do the hard work of thinking theologically and then ask the important "So what?" question. (If I believe _____, what difference does that make in how I live my life?) More "practical" studies (i.e., parenting, book discussions) also will incorporate theological questions.

--An emphasis on discipleship as a life-long journey for everyone.

--An open environment in which people can ask the real questions they have about their faith, rather than feeling they have to have the "right" answers.

Becky: *I see two major indicators: (1) when the church is creating the type of disciples you believe God wants you to produce, and (2) when the church is coaching/leading/mentoring others to be the same way—meaning, beyond the church walls.*

Roger: *I think that every church needs to establish a picture of what a disciple looks like and needs to know and experience. Attached is a list we have created through prayer and scripture study. One list is the individual traits, the other are measurable signs (some objective, others subjective) Hope this helps.*

July 20

"Equipping people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life."

What is one practice at your church that you believe is most effective in helping to accomplish this task? Don't be humble; if the answer is "my sermons," name it and claim it!

Dawn - *We have an **active Sunday school for 55 plus ages**; we are trying to reach our younger adults with Wednesday night "Soul Food" which has a practical Christianity class choice (parenting, etc.) and a short Bible study choice (4 weeks on the Psalms) throughout the school year. AS you know, J-P's got the kids wrapped up, so lots of great faith formation work done there!*

Roger - *I would say that the one practice that has made the biggest difference is **our "one idea" approach**. It isn't a single item, but the alignment of multiple items. Sermon series are designed about a year out, music is picked to coincide with the individual Sundays, daily devotionals are developed to help people pursue the theme through Bible study on their own during the week following a sermon, and the Community groups and Sunday School classes are also focused on the same scriptures and themes. It takes a lot of work, but our hope is that it is like a duck on a pond. Most of the work takes place out of sight.*

Ryan - *Hey – just returned from Puerto Rico – a powerful trip – one in which likely has some bearing on your questions. I'm amazed that they have it as a part of their DNA to spread the Gospel – that they have such a passion for their faith. It is not uncommon for a Disciples church to birth a new church that will then put down roots just a few blocks from the mother church. If that happened in the US, there would be a church split and talk of turf battles!*

*Anyway, I know I'm a question behind but thought I'd answer this one first. At Geist, a part of it is the preaching (I can say it since they're not my sermons). Randy gives people the tools to be a welcoming presence in much of his preaching – he prods them to be evangelists (in the subtle sense of the word). I also think that having **a near requirement of a membership inquiry class** puts people "on the same page" with regard to beliefs, history, expectations of members, etc. OK, that's two – I'll stop.*

David - *Two things come to mind:*

Last year, we did Disciple Bible Study for 37 weeks. Old and New Testaments. 21 of our folks participated and all found it to be very transforming.

Second, I did a sermon series in January/ February titled "When Life Goes Into Recession." The outline is below. I invited members of the congregation to e-mail their experiences of any of the issues I was addressing, telling me what helped, what resources of the faith strengthened them, and what didn't help. The responses were powerful and the series was very well attended.

During difficult times, Christians need the resources of our faith and one another more than ever. So, as we enter a New Year fraught with uncertainty, we'll look together at some of the ways in which "life goes into recession" and how caring Christians can offer help and hope to brothers and sisters facing difficulties.

*1/11 Economic Recession: Financial Distress
1/18 Relational Recession: Divorce and Separation
1/25 " " Alienation and Forgiveness
2/1 " " Grief
2/8 Physical Recession: Illness
2/22 Emotional Recession: Worry and Stress
3/1 Spiritual Recession: Doubt and Despair*

Kathy - At this point I would say my sermons. I try to raise theological questions and offer ways to apply the answers that people come up with to their daily lives. I use a lot of illustrations from every-day life to help with this.

*Becky - Well, certainly the expectation I have for my sermons is to equip people for real life. However, I believe that **small groups are where the real connection happens**—whether that be intentional small groups, Sunday School small groups, interest-related small groups. In that dialogue people share and learn from one another. I get frustrated that sermons are lecture-only instead of experiential, because I am not confident that a majority of peoples' lives are changed by only coming to Sunday morning worship...and that's where a majority of people get their only contact with faith learning.*

That being said, we do not have intentional small groups here....

August – “We are call to share God's love with us through compassionate service to others”

August 3

This week's question: What biblical passages/themes/characters/stories come to mind when you read this?

David: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, **if you love one another.**” John 13:35

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Matthew 25:35

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" Matthew 9:36

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress." James 1:27

Inviting the lame, the maimed, the blind, and the poor to the banquet in Luke 14

Roger: *The story that comes to my mind is **Peter and John going into the temple and passing the lame man asking for alms**. The reason I choose this story is not simply because of the compassion that was shown, but because it is 1) what the man REALLY needs, and 2) it is identified by both motive and the power by which it is done. Maybe this is my verse because of the number of times I have seen Disciple efforts at compassion look just like social work and nothing more. Taking the extra step offers the chance for God to be glorified.*

Becky: *When I read this theme, I think of the deacons serving the widows, of **Jesus washing the feet of his disciples**. I think of Moses and how he served God with all his heart often accepting assignments others would have refused (how could anyone lead those whining people under those circumstances for all those years????). I think of David's devotion to God's work and how God chose to work through him regardless of the many times he screwed up.*

Kathy: *This answer may seem obvious, but the first "character" who comes to mind is Jesus. The more I read the stories from the gospels, the more **I am struck by how compassionate Jesus was**. Even more than that, I am struck by how the compassion he showed seemed so tailored to the needs of the specific individual whom he served.*

August 10

Our theme for this month is: "Sharing God's love for us through compassionate service to others."

The question this week is:

What is the role of the pastor in helping a church live out this statement?

Roger: *I suspect that the role of the pastor is at least 2-fold. Part of it has to be the teaching aspect. Not only the biblical mandate, but the realities of what makes a church vital. The churches who become introverted and self-serving inevitably stagnate and die over time. This is just the opposite of what people tend to expect, so it is counter-intuitive. But **reaching out helps the internal vitality of a church**.*

The other part is modeling. If a pastor constantly pushes outreach efforts but stays home, then there will be a problem. It doesn't mean the pastor has to be a part of every outreach effort,

Sabbatical Conversations

but people need to see him/her on the line helping move food boxes, etc. along with everyone else.

Becky: **Equip.** Equip. Equip. **Train.** Train. Train. **Model.** Model. Model.

Ryan: *In our experience, if the Senior Minister is not behind it, it doesn't get much traction. So, whether it's a mission trip or our local mission projects (shelters, etc.), **it's gotta be tooted by the Senior Minister.** We've done this by having signups immediately after worship at a time when Randy preaches on getting involved (it's called guilt). In addition, the staff person responsible for outreach must give affirmation and press to the groups.*

Kathy: *Here are what I see as some of the aspects of that role:*

Help people understand/accept in new ways just how radically God loves us and how that love makes a difference in our lives.

Help people begin to identify concrete ways that can serve others.

Provide opportunities for people to engage in service at a variety of levels--short one-time experience, longer experiences (i.e., mission trip), ongoing engagements, etc.

Provide opportunities for people to reflect theologically on their service experiences.

Provide ongoing emphases on the importance of service--both through the church and in other areas of a person's life.

August 17

Our theme for this month is: "Sharing God's love for us through compassionate service to others."

The question this week is:

What are a few ways your church does this most effectively? Give me a couple of your "best practices" in sharing God's love. This is your chance to boast in God's name!

David: *Compassionate service to others...*

We have a yearly trip to Mexico over President's Day weekend when we build a house for a Mexican family in Puerto Penasco.

We support our local Food Bank in many ways. I am President of the board, one of our lay members will be chairing the yearly Hike for Hunger that involves the entire community in a CROP Walk-like fundraiser. We're also initiating monthly First Sunday food offerings.

Our youth have solicited in-kind donations across the years that have benefitted the Domestic Violence Shelter, the Children's Hospital, and socks, water, and clothing for the homeless.

We sent a significant gift from our first capital campaign through Week of Compassion to underwrite the cost of digging a few wells in Zimbabwe (the campaign was called Wellspring of Blessing).

I lead an every-other-week worship service and devotional time for a small assisted living center up our way-- about a dozen ladies in varying states of physical and mental health.

Led a grief support group for a couple years in the meeting room of our local library to which several members of the larger community outside our congregation came.

For five years until she died one of our members provided transportation to and from worship for a developmentally disabled woman whose social worker leafed through the phone book one day asking if any church would provide a ride for Jenny. Glad to say we were able to say Yes. Sorry she had to get all the way to the Cs in the phone book before she got a Yes, though.

I did the thing where you give everyone in worship an envelope with \$10 in it. Told them to use it in a way that blessed someone else and to submit a sentence or two as to how they used it. Some really neat things emerged from that.

Dawn: Finally, something to share. <http://theraytownpost.com/as-simple-as-a-sack-lunch/>

Roger: Soles 4 Souls shoe campaign
Letters to overseas soldiers
Empty Thanksgiving truck at local shelter
Monthly food collection for this shelter
After church tutoring program
Funds for local women's shelter
School supplies for African children.

Becky: Our church is newly involved with a great ministry through which we will make an impact through serving. We have recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Illinois National Guard to become a Partner in Care congregation. Through this official relationship with the ILNG we agree to provide care to Guard members and their families to the extent we can/wish. This is designed to be a network whereby needs are forwarded to us and we network both within our congregation and within the community to meet those needs. It may be doing an odd job around the house while a husband is deployed, it may mean taking the father and kids out to lunch when the wife is deployed, it may be providing pastoral counseling upon a soldier's return. The Guard will offer training in certain areas for those who are interested in providing specialized care.

We recently had our first experience a couple of weeks ago when a 19-year-old Sullivan young man was killed in Afghanistan. Through Partners in Care we were able to provide support to his mother and sister by organizing a funeral dinner hosted by the American Legion. We contacted other churches through our local ministerial association. There is an unfinished construction project in the mother's home which we will tackle next when we receive the OK from the mother.

First Christian is the first congregation in Illinois to sign up for the program, and Illinois is only the second state (after Maryland) to begin it. Sullivan has a local military family support group which sends care packages, etc. but they really aren't equipped to do a lot more. Through this latest effort we have had people from other churches express an interest in participating

with Partners in Care. It seems that this will evolve into FCC providing the administrative network to make the ministry happen using all the resources in the community at our disposal. Although our agreement begins with the ILNG, we will not limit our ministry to Guard members only but will extend it to all branches of military service. Having the agreement, however, gives us credence and authority to participate in ways not available to other than “official” personnel.

It was amazing to see all the people and organizations in town working together to honor this fallen soldier. That is one of the greatest benefits of living in a small town, and the people of Sullivan are exceptionally good at it! This is a developing ministry for us but I see a huge impact. Our agreement says we will not proselytize (which knocks out many of the evangelical-type churches who won’t sign such an agreement), and certainly that is not our ultimate goal—our goal is to serve others in the name of Jesus Christ. Partners in Care in one “tool” God has handed us so we can do exactly that.

Kathy: Our annual mission trip to Maine. This trip has evolved over the past couple of years as we’ve added group reflection time during which we daily think about and share what we’re learning and how that impacts our faith.

Our engagement with local group homes for adults with developmental disabilities. This engagement ranges from having group-home residents be part of our worshipping community to collecting food and other items once a month for the homes to volunteering to read to/spend time with residents to helping with repairs at the homes and the main office.

Ryan: Most churches do Thanksgiving and/or Christmas baskets as do we but we’ve found it meaningful to also do Easter baskets for those in need. We work through same agencies we work through at other times of the year to deliver food and kid’s Easter baskets. The most meaningful part is that we do the delivery to the families rather than dropping it off someplace. Mostly, people have a powerful experience.

While our mission trips get the most press in newsletters, fundraising, etc., the most powerful ministries seem to be the ongoing teams that serve at family homeless shelter, men’s mission and at Riley Hospital family overnight area.

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ORIGINAL SABBATICAL PLAN

Sabbatical *—noun* -any extended period of leave from one's customary work, esp. for rest, to acquire new skills or training, etc.

When I started at Community Christian Church in 2001, part of my employment contract allowed for a sabbatical. It reads, “From July 1, 2001, your date of original employment, every five years you will be granted a paid three-month sabbatical leave for the purposes of continuing education.” Therefore, this coming summer, from June 1 to Sept. 7, I will be taking my first sabbatical (only three years late!).

My plan for how to use that time is included in this packet. I hope it will give you a clear sense of how I will be fulfilling the requirement of continuing education while experiencing the rest and renewal for which a sabbatical is intended. I am focusing my sabbatical time around our church’s mission statement, which has three areas of focus:

- *Welcome* people into a loving and caring church family.
- *Equip* people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life.
- *Share* Christ’s love for us through compassionate service to others.

Each month I will focus on a different aspect of the mission statement and use that as a guide for my study and reflection. I hope to emerge from the sabbatical with a renewed understanding of and commitment to our mission statement.

So what happens at CCC during those months? A lot, I hope! Michael will be brought on staff on a temporary full-time basis to cover the week-to-week responsibilities, and Nelson will be taking a more active role in pastoral care. The Elders and other elected leaders of the church will be responsible for keeping us moving forward during that time. The Sabbatical Planning Team is working on a plan for the church that would mirror some of the same areas on which I will be focusing.

Being the computer junkie that I am, I will be sure to keep in touch with all of you. I plan on maintaining a “sabbatical blog” during my time away, which will include stories, reflections, and other offerings. I’ll be sharing thoughts on my reading of scripture, reviews and commentary on books I read, and reflections on conferences I attend. While I won’t be checking work email or answering cell phone calls, I will be thinking of you and praying for you. While we’ll be out of sight from each other, you will never be out of mind for me.

While the idea of taking a sabbatical both scares and excites me, I believe it will be a time of growth for all of us. I’m eager to learn about myself during my time away, but I’m even more enthusiastic to hear what the church learns about itself. I expect that when we come together again in September, we will be different than when we parted company in June, thanks to God’s work in us.

Kory

Original Sabbatical Plan

Following in the Disciples of Christ's foundational belief in the "priesthood of all believers," effective church leadership results when a team acts in concert to accomplish God's work. A church committed to a pastoral sabbatical concept foresees benefits for both the pastor and the congregation. The goal of Kory's sabbatical, for him, is to permit him time for renewal of spirit and re-connection –with God, fellow pastors, and his inner being. For the church the goal is to discover more about who we are as a congregation and as individuals. This initiative will empower the laity of our church as we step forward to emulate what the early church did in the book of Acts, finding strengths and developing competencies we never suspected we possess.

Thus, for the mutual benefits to accrue, we need for the church leadership and the congregation all to support and participate in this opportunity for rejuvenation, renewal, and growth as we affirm the tenets of our mission statement-- welcoming, equipping, and sharing. Our coming together again as a church family upon Kory's return should find us stronger, amazed at our learning and growth, and ready to go where God is leading us with preparation, energy, passion, and excitement.

The Sabbatical Planning Team

Susan Bracken

Barry Lyerly

Beth McCormack

Kay Severns

Michael Swartzentruber

June

Focus – Welcoming people into a loving and caring church family

Event

June 25-26 - Granger Community Church Workshop – First and Lasting Impressions

<http://www.wiredchurches.com/s.nl/sc.7/.f>

This event focuses on helping churches creating eye-popping first impressions for visitors as well as ways to encourage them to return and become integrated into the church. Granger Community Church is on the cutting edge of innovative church practices.

Exercise

Visit 2-3 churches in the area and reflect on how they do “welcoming”

This will serve a dual purpose: (1) It will give me a chance to worship as a participant instead of a leader and (2) I will be able to observe how these churches creating an atmosphere of welcoming and hospitality. I will most likely continue this practice for the duration of my sabbatical.

Reading

Baab, Lynn. Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation’s Heart and Soul.

Stevens, Tim and Tony Morgan. Simply Strategic Growth: Attracting a Crowd to Your Church and Simply Strategic Stuff: Help for Leaders Drowning in the Details of Running a Church.

(Stevens and Morgan are on staff at Granger Community Church)

First Impressions : Creating WOW! Experiences

Next Session:

Thursday June 25, 2009 [9 a.m. - 4 p.m.]

Learn how to make great first impressions that last. Discover ways to:

- Build your team from the ground up, based on the experience you define.
- Cultivate volunteer “wow-makers.”
- Keep things like announcements, communion and the offering from distracting your guests or making them feel like outsiders.
- Determine the “rules” your church has even if you don’t know them yet.
- Experience hands-on training that will empower your volunteers.

Lasting Impressions

Next Sessions:

Friday, June 26, 2009 [9 a.m. - 4 p.m.]

Lasting Impressions picks up where First Impressions leaves off. As guests return to your church, how will you help them move from spectator to committed Christ-follower? Learn to create environments in your church that allow your guest to move organically toward Christ and others who are following Him. We'll discuss:

- Things you can - and can't - do to help others grow.
- The trouble with assimilation and how to fix it.
- Learning to think like an architect in relational spaces.
- Small groups: discipleship or friendship?
- Involving people sooner than later: the power of volunteering.
- How to develop experiences that encourage people to explore and grow in their personal journeys toward Christ.

Presenter: Mark Waltz, Pastor of Connections

Mark Waltz is a unifying force at Granger where he oversees adult relational connections, including groups, guest services and volunteer strategies. Mark’s book, *First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church*, addresses the issues of guest attendance growth and volunteer development, offering strategies for making high-impact first impressions. Mark’s ministry expertise is complemented by his marketplace experience, which includes retail management, employment and recruitment. By the way, he’s got a blog:

BecausePeopleMatter.com.

This workshop will be held on the campus of Granger Community Church. Check-in begins at 8:30 a.m. The sessions will run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Lunch and breaks will be provided.

Book Descriptions

Baab, Lynn. Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul.

Product Description

A congregation communicates its heart and soul through words, photos, actions, programs, architecture, decor, the arts, and countless other aspects of congregational life. In *Reaching Out in a Networked World*, communications expert and pastor Lynne Baab examines technologies such as websites, blogs, online communities, and desktop publishing. She demonstrates how a congregation can evaluate these tools and appropriately use them to communicate its heart and soul, to convey its identity and values both within and outside the congregation.

Baab urges congregation leaders to reflect on the way they communicate. The recent explosion in communication technologies offers many new ways to present values and identity, but no one has much experience thinking about how best to use these tools. Baab seeks to help leaders use these new technologies with more precision, flair, and consistency. When congregations are intentional about communicating who they are and what they value, people in the wider community can get a clear and coherent picture of the congregation and its mission. Newcomers and visitors are more likely to see why faith commitments matter and why and how they might become involved in this congregation, while current members and leaders will greatly benefit from having a unified vision of the congregation's heart and soul.

Stevens, Tim and Tony Morgan. Simply Strategic Growth: Attracting a Crowd to Your Church and Simply Strategic Stuff: Help for Leaders Drowning in the Details of Running a Church.

Product Description for “Simply Stuff”

Here are 99 topics church leaders need to know! Some say it's the little things that matter the most, but the little details are often what pastors dread the most. Easy-to-understand and humorous, *Simply Strategic Stuff* equips pastors to perform the administrative details of pastoring with ease, and enthusiasm. Pastors are encouraged to consider basic principles that will help them develop systems and structures for releasing growth, enabling churches to reach their communities and the world for Jesus Christ!

July

Focus – Equipping people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life

Event

July 29-Aug 2 - General Assembly, Indianapolis, IN

<http://www.disciples.org/GeneralAssembly/tabid/59/Default.aspx>

The purpose of the Assembly is to bring members of the denomination together for continuing education, denominational information and fellowship. The benefit for my attendance is that it keeps me connected with my colleagues and with the denomination. That in turn benefits the church because I bring back with me that information and those connections which better help me serve the church. If I am more informed, the congregation is more informed. In addition, there are a number of resource groups and workshops that I would attend relating to church ministry. These groups can be invaluable sources of information and new ideas that I would use in the church.

Exercise

Read through and blog about 1-2 Timothy

Timothy was one of Paul's closest companions and most faithful followers. Paul wrote these two letters to Timothy to give him practical advice about the ministry. Immersing myself in these letters will help me learn from Paul's teachings about leading a congregation and hopefully my reflections will provide insight for others.

Reading

Eswine, Zack. Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons that Connect with Our Culture.

Hybels, Bill. Axiom: Powerful Leadership Proverbs.

Liefeld, Walter. 1 and 2 Timothy: NIV Application Commentary.

2009 General Assembly Indianapolis, IN

...for the Healing of the Nations

Theme/Overview

Disciples Assembly planners approached the 2009 General Assembly with awareness of the newly stated Disciples identity:

"We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."

This assembly is designed to help us embody that self-understanding.

Through our theme, "for the Healing of the Nations" (Rev. 22:1-5), we address our hope to participate in God's healing, and ultimate redemption of the world. In worship we focus on our journey back to God's created wholeness. In an Assembly-wide conversation we focus on our future together as "a movement for wholeness." Then, through our closing All-Assembly Festival and communion service we extend our witness. Inviting guests from the "fragmented world" -- in Indianapolis and beyond -- who seek companionship for their faith journey, we will make it clear that Christ invites all to the Table of Blessing and Hope.

Worship

General Assembly worship moves Disciples through the self-understanding of our created goodness (Gen. 2) to our need for repentance and forgiveness when we walk away from the goodness that bathes our creation (Gen. 3). Understanding anew our call to wholeness, we share in Jesus' pray that we may be one, "that the world may believe," (John 17). Refreshed by God's call on our lives, we consider our own baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit as empowerment to live lives – to act in ways – worthy of our calling (Acts 2). On our final day together, a Sunday, we move into the Indianapolis area's houses of worship for reflection on the day when God's imagination for creation restores us to wholeness (Rev. 22).

Then, in celebration of God's care and call for all creation, we gather for a closing concert and communion service on Sunday afternoon, inviting the entire Indianapolis metropolitan area community – especially those who seek companionship for their faith journey. There we spread the Lord's Table one more time together and "welcome all... as God has welcomed us."

This year's worship experiences feature an all-Disciples line up of preachers to bring the Good News of God's redemptive love to the Disciples Assembly. They are:

Original Sabbatical Plan

- [Cynthia Hale](#), Sr. Pastor, Ray of Hope Christian Church, Atlanta, Ga.
- [Doug Skinner](#), Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas
- [Sharon E. Watkins](#), General Minister and President, Indianapolis, Ind.
- [Frank Thomas](#), Sr. Pastor, Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, Memphis, Tenn.

To read more about the General Assembly speakers and their biographies, visit:
www.disciples.org/ga

Worship also features the musical direction of accomplished actor and musician, Bill Thomas, one of the ministers of Church of the Valley Christian Church in Van Nuys, Ca. Joining him again is a worship band of Disciples musicians, with surprise appearances by gifted special musical artists.

Worshipful Work/Business

A Wednesday afternoon business session begins the official work of the Assembly in Indianapolis, with General Minister and President Sharon E. Watkins delivering the State of the Church Address as one of the first reports of the Assembly.

Ayanna Johnson, 1st Vice Moderator, opens the worshipful work of our business sessions, leading us in prayer and reflection to start each day. Each morning a different speaker will follow her reflection, and address what it means to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

Thursday morning, the speaker is Rick Lowery, First Testament scholar and interim dean at Lexington Theological Seminary. He will unpack the pair of scriptures upon which our theme is based. (Gen. 2:4bff and Rev. 22:1-5)

Friday morning, plans are being finalized to identify a speaker who addresses the community, and how we might find wholeness in ways that make our neighborhoods and communities healthier and more sustainable.

Saturday morning brings Jose Morales, to the podium. Morales, a Chicago-area pastor and young adult who came to Disciples from a Pentecostal background, will remind Disciples that the early passion of the Disciples revival movement still burns in our hearts ready to burst into revival flame again.

At the close of each business session, Moderator Newell Williams, noted Disciples historian and President of Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas, provides a brief history presentation to the gathering, in recognition of the 200th Anniversary of one of the Disciples founding documents, The Declaration and Address of Thomas Campbell.

Book Descriptions

Eswine, Zack. Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons that Connect with Our Culture.

Product Description

Zack Eswine starts this unique pastoral resource with a captivating question: Could I now reach who I once was? Challenging the idea that today's preachers must do away with biblical or expository preaching if they are to reach non-Christian people, Eswine offers a way of preaching that embraces biblical exposition in missional terms. Recognizing all of the different cultural situations in which the gospel must be preached, he gives preachers practical advice on preaching in a global context while remaining faithful to the Bible. Pastors, seminarians, and church and ministry leaders who speak in various contexts will welcome this fresh, thoughtful examination of bringing the Word to today's multi-everything, post-everything world.

Hybels, Bill. Axiom: Powerful Leadership Proverbs.

Product Description

Winning leaders have winning points of view—succinct, practical, portable leadership proverbs that help them arbitrate decisions and rouse troops to action. In Axiom: The Language of Leadership, Bill Hybels reveals eighty God-given, from-the-gut truths that continue to raise his game and his vision, thirty-plus years into his local-church leadership experience.

Liefeld, Walter. 1 and 2 Timothy: NIV Application Commentary.

Product Description

This volume of the NIV Application Commentary Series, helps readers learn how the message of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus can have the same powerful impact today that they did when they were first written. Walter Liefeld reveals the context and meanings of Paul's letters to two leaders in the early Christian church. He explores the present-day implications of these epistles and helps the reader to accurately apply the principles they contain to contemporary issues.

August

*Focus – Sharing God’s love with us through compassionate service to others
(my “outreach” will be “inreach” which will prepare me for more outreach)*

Event and Exercise

August 16-21 - Cedarly Clergy Retreat Center – Delafield, WI

<http://www.pastorsretreatnetwork.org/index.asp>

Estimated cost – travel costs only

Cedarly is a part of the Pastors’ Retreat Network, a collection of retreat centers around the country that offer full-time clergy a place of rest and renewal at no charge. The purpose of the retreat will be to reconnect with God as I rest and prepare to end my sabbatical. I will use daily prayer, reading and exercise to help me rejuvenate my call to serve God. I will also go on a “media fast” (except for a cell phone call to my family once a day) to help clear my mind and unclutter my soul.

Reading

Hybels, Bill. Holy Discontent: Fueling the Fire that Ignites Personal Vision.

Rhodes, Tricia McCary. Holy Chaos: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life You Have.

Cedarly Clergy Retreat Center

ABOUT OUR RETREATS

*Sermon preparation ... counseling ... administrative matters ... teaching ...
stewardship drives ... personnel issues ... financial challenges ...
denominational affairs ... recruitment ... personal growth ... family matters*

A pastor's daily responsibilities are so demanding and so important.

But one thing is more important still—maintaining a right relationship with God.

Our five-day retreats are designed to help you do just that.

The experience will profoundly affect your life and ministry—by changing your heart and helping you regain your perspective.

Imagine the renewal and refreshment you will gain as you:

- Rest, without having to keep an eye on the clock
- Spend time in prayer and Scripture reading
- Take a walk and let God speak to you
- Enjoy a meal with your hosts and fellow retreat guests
- Read a good book
- Nap, talk, play, meditate, or simply enjoy the view
- Contemplate, journal or discuss the day's experiences
- Enjoy a “date” with your spouse
- Grab a new friend and explore the community

Our retreats enable you to enjoy relaxation, solitude and contemplation. But we also appreciate God's creativity and humor. Laughter abounds and often serves as the release necessary for a deeper experience with God and others.

Step away from the demands of your calling and step into a special place where you can more clearly feel God's presence and respond to His call.

Book Descriptions

Hybels, Bill. Holy Discontent: Fueling the Fire that Ignites Personal Vision.

Product Description

What is the one aspect of this broken world that, when you see it, touch it, get near it, you just can't stand? Very likely, that firestorm of frustration reflects your holy discontent, a reality so troubling that you are thrust off the couch and into the game. It's during these defining times when your eyes open to the needs surrounding you and your heart hungers to respond that you hear God say, "I feel the same way about this problem. Now, let's go solve it together!"

Bill Hybels invites you to consider the dramatic impact your life will have when you allow your holy discontent to fuel instead of frustrate you. Using examples from the Bible, his own life, and the experiences of others, Hybels shows how you can find and feed your personal area of holy discontent, fight for it when things get risky, and follow it when it takes a mid-course turn. As you live from the energy of your holy discontent, you'll fulfill your role in setting what is wrong in this world right!

Rhodes, Tricia McCary. Holy Chaos: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life You Have.

Product Description

Life is often chaotic. And no matter how hard you try to find space, to slow down, the chaos always seems to win.

Tricia Rhodes's life is chaotic too. And it became even more so during an eight-month period when her son and daughter-in-law and two grandchildren moved in. Gone was her time for morning prayer, gone was any quiet at all with a house full of people.

But God broke in. And Tricia learned to see him and communicate with him in whole new ways--not on a spiritual retreat, but right in the midst of the chaos of life. She offers us here a fresh view of connecting to God, one that focuses on quality time and frees us from the rigidity of a devotional life that may feel stifled, grow stagnant or bring about guilt when we can't keep up.

These pages will help awaken your heart to the reality of God's presence in your life--just as it is--providing new ways to pray, to listen to God, to view others the way God sees them, to be guided by God. "Making the Chaos Sacred" sections at the end of each chapter and suggestions for prayer experiments give practical suggestions for connecting with God and noticing his work throughout each day.

God is not afraid of chaos. If a chaotic life has you running, let Tricia's words offered here help you run to God in the midst of it and discover the ways he can turn even chaos into something sacred.

Ongoing activities during sabbatical

- Sabbatical Blog – running commentary/reflection on sabbatical experiences
- Questionnaire to fellow pastors at the beginning of each month about how their church does each of the three foci; answers will be shared anonymously on the blog and compiled as part of the final product

Final product will include:

- Blog entries and reflections from the three months
- Reflections and commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy
- Reports from Granger conference and General Assembly with a special emphasis on observations that will be beneficial to CCC
- Text of sermons heard (if possible)
- Results of questionnaires
- Bibliography